

Melkites and Icon Worship during the Iconoclastic Period

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Beginning in the second half of the sixth century, a slow but steady diffusion of icons of saints, of Christ, and of the Virgin is evident in the Empire. The best physical evidence of this phenomenon are a few icons dated to that period, which are preserved in Egypt (mainly in St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai), in Rome, and in European collections.¹ These icons do not, however, indicate the prevalence of a form of icon worship during this period, for most of them were, in fact, "simple commemorative and *ex voto* images,"² with the exception of some that were considered relics and therefore endowed with miraculous or intercessory powers. The origin of the cult of icons apparently dates

to a later time, probably toward the end of the seventh century.³

Texts have been preserved that bear witness to an ongoing discussion about the veneration of icons among contemporary Christians of the seventh century. Icon worship is defended, either against the criticism of the Jews (as in the *apologia* of Leontios of Naples against the Jews, written under Heraclius ca. 610–640),⁴ or against pagan idolatrous practices and early iconoclast

3 Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 32–68.

4 See the lengthy frag. 3 in the edition of V. Deroche, "L'Apologie contre les Juifs de Léontios de Néapolis," *TM* 12 (1994): 45–104, esp. 74, where Leontios acknowledges, "We represent Christ and his sufferings in churches, houses and places, in icons, clothes, chambers and dresses and everywhere." For a panoramic study of the disputations among Jews and Christians in the seventh century, see G. Dagron and V. Deroche, "Juifs et Chrétiens dans l'Orient du VII^e siècle," *TM* 11 (1991): 17–273 and Av. Cameron, "Cyprus at the Time of the Arab Conquests," *Ἐπερπλέ της Κυπριακής Εταιρείας Ιστορικών Σπουδών* 1 (1992): 27–50 (repr. in eadem, *Changing Cultures in Early Byzantium* [Aldershot, 1996], no. VI). Works that deal with the question of images in the seventh century include *Trophées of Damascus*, in *Les trophées de Damas: Controverse judéo-chrétienne du VII^e siècle*, ed. G. Bardy, *PO* 15.2 (Paris, 1920; repr., Louvain, 1973); *The History of the Likeness of Christ*, in *The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the History of the Likeness of Christ which the Jews of Tiberias made to Mock At*, ed. E. A. W. Budge, 2 vols. (London, 1899); see also H. J. W. Drijvers, "An Icon of the Dead Christ on the Cross in a Syriac Text," *OCA* 256 (1998): 607–16; A. Alexakis, ed., "Stephen of Bostra: Fragmenta contra Iudeos (CPG 7790), A New Edition," *JÖB* 43 (1993): 45–60; or the above mentioned *Apologia* of Leontios.

1 For the icons of Egypt, see §10, below. For the Roman icons, see P. Amato, *De Vera Effigie Mariae: Antiche icone romane* (Rome, 1988), esp. 18 (with an icon of the Virgin dating perhaps to the 5th century); and D. Knipp, "The Chapel of Physicians at Santa Maria Antiqua," *DOP* 56 (2002): 1–23.

2 For this view, see L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850: A History* (Cambridge, 2011), 36–38, 56–62. Still influential studies on the cult of icons before iconoclasm remain E. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm," *DOP* 8 (1954): 83–150; L. W. Barnard, *The Graeco-Roman and Oriental Background of the Iconoclastic Controversy* (Leiden, 1974); and A. Grabar, *L'iconoclasme byzantin: Le dossier archéologique* (Paris, 1984), 11–162. For the miraculous acheiropoeita, see E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende* (Leipzig, 1899) and also Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 35–36 and 54–56. For a good introduction to the artistic cross-influences of the period, see the papers collected in *Byzantium and Islam: An Age of Transition, 7th–9th Century*, ed. H. C. Evans and B. Ratliff (New Haven, 2012).

attacks (as in the treatise against the iconoclasts of the Armenian Vardanes Kertol, dating perhaps as early as 604–7).⁵ However, the authenticity of some of these texts has been repeatedly questioned,⁶ and, in any case, they only bear witness to what can be considered private practices of icon worship, which eventually entered the sacred space of churches but did not receive official sanction by the ecclesiastical authorities. The starting point for the iconoclast controversy is, therefore, to be linked with the famous canon 82 of the *Quinisextum* council of 692, which sanctioned and encouraged for the first time the depiction of Christ as man “instead of the ancient lamb.”⁷ The rest of the story is well known and has to do with the beginnings of Iconoclasm in Constantinople during the reign of Leo III, who reacted against an increasing icon worship that he considered idolatrous.⁸

However, while the outbreak and development of the iconoclast crisis in the Empire during the eighth and ninth centuries is attested in many (albeit controversial) sources, beliefs and debates about icon worship among Christians living under Islamic rule are much less well known. Recent publications tend to stress the predominance of icon worship among Middle Eastern Christians and to collect evidence in support of the continuity of practices of icon worship during the iconoclast period.⁹ But it is a long way from

5 T. F. Matthews, “Vrt’anēs K’ert’oł and the Early Theology of Images,” *REArm* 31 (2008–9): 101–26.

6 In the case of Leontios, see mainly the studies of P. Speck, “Der Dialog mit einem Juden angeblich des Leontios von Neapolis,” in *Varia*, vol. 2, *Ποικίλα βυζαντινά* 6 (Bonn, 1987), 315–22; idem, “Schweinfleisch und Bilderkult: Zur Bilderfrage in den sogenannten Judendialogen,” in *To Ελληνικόν: Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis Jr.*, ed. J. S. Langdon et al. (New York, 1993), 1:367–83; idem, “Adversus Iudeaos—pro imaginibus: Die Gedanken und Argumente des Leontios von Neapolis und des Georgios von Zypern,” in *Varia*, vol. 6, *Ποικίλα βυζαντινά* 15 (Bonn, 1997), 131–76. Haldon and Brubaker, *Iconoclast Era* (n. 2 above), 49–50, follow the arguments of Speck.

7 G. Nedungatt and M. Featherstone, *The Council in Trullo Revisited*, *Kanonika* 6 (Rome, 1995), 162–64.

8 An overview of this emperor now may be found in Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 69–155.

9 See, for instance, R. Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule* (Princeton, 1995), 210–11; and, especially, H. G. B. Teule, “The Veneration of Images in the East Syriac Tradition,” and S. H. Griffith, “Christians, Muslims and the Image of the One God: Iconophilia and Iconophobia in the World of Islam in Umayyad and Early Abbasid Times,” both in *Die Welt der*

that to the idea that all the churches in Islamic territories officially sanctioned icon worship during this period. Considering the multiplicity of creeds among the Christians under Islamic rule, it would be strange if all of their churches agreed on the recent endorsement of icon cult in Constantinople (692), especially if we take into account that this practice was undoubtedly regarded with increasing hostility by the Muslim authorities, as we shall see. It must, therefore be assumed, a priori, that there were different sensibilities at different times and that, accordingly, no unanimity on icon worship was reached for the moment.

This does not necessarily mean that the iconoclast crisis in the Byzantine Empire was reproduced among the Christians in the Middle East. On the contrary, it is easily imaginable that the ecclesiastical authorities of the Melkites, Jacobites (West Syrians), Nestorians (East Syrians), and Copts tried to avoid internal confrontation on this issue in order to preserve the unity of their flocks: the crisis in contemporary Byzantium may well have served as a monitory reminder of the consequences such a debate could trigger. Accordingly, East Christian churches under Islam may have followed a middle way, by permitting or tolerating individual practices of icon worship, but preventing them from entering the liturgy or from being displayed in the churches. Such a response may also have appeased Islamic iconophobia.

In this paper, I shall reappraise the evidence concerning icons and icon worship in the Melkite Church during the iconoclastic crisis in Byzantium.¹⁰ The purpose is not to argue for either an iconodule or an iconoclastic Melkite position, but to examine carefully the evidence supplied by the sources against the Byzantine background, commenting upon similarities and differences with and from Byzantine iconoclasts and iconodules. This eclectic procedure is advisable, as there is, in fact, a wide range of attitudes toward icons that have defied every attempt at schematic classification. Thus, the mere presence of icons is, by itself, never a proof of icon worship: the place of the icon, its character as a

Götterbilder, ed. B. Groneberg and H. Spieckermann, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 376 (Berlin and New York, 2007), 324–46 and 347–80.

10 In this paper, I will use the expression “icon worship” in a rather neutral way to refer to the cult or veneration of icons, whether in private or in the church, without entering into debates about the theological interpretation of this act by contemporaries or by modern scholars.

relic, the (holy) persons it represents, or even the name it was given, are always points to consider. Moreover, iconoclasm in Byzantium is not an altogether homogeneous or even a well-known phenomenon, for it passed through successive and different phases. Contrary to popular imagination, images were rarely destroyed.¹¹ Again, prudence is appropriate here, and we must avoid confounding the lack of evidence for icon destruction with tacit support for the pious cult of the holy images.

We shall first study the growing Islamic hostility to images from the beginning of the eighth century, as well as its repercussion on Christian practices (§1). This discussion will be followed by reflections on the phenomenon of “iconophobia” attested in some churches of the period (§2). We shall then examine the figure of John of Damascus (§3) and the references in some Greek and Latin sources about councils held by the Melkites in the eighth century, at which iconoclastic practices were allegedly condemned (§§4–6). Thereafter, we shall consider the treatise on the icons attributed to Theodore Abū Qurra (§7), as well as other Melkite treatises that contain passing references to icons (§8). Finally, after briefly taking into account some Greek *Lives* (§9), we shall review some sources in search of information on icon worship among Coptic, Jacobite, and Nestorian Churches (§10).

Arabic and Greek, as well as some Latin, sources will provide the main basis for our approach; our hope is to reveal a more complex attitude of the Melkites toward images than previously assumed.

1. Islamic Hostility against Images and the Decree of Yazid

Many sources (first Greek, but also Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, and even Latin) report that the caliph Yazid (721–724) was persuaded by a Jewish magician to decree a general constitution banning images from churches and public spaces in the caliphate. In

¹¹ Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era* (n. 2 above), 199–212. Even Leo III erected images of the apostles, the prophets, and the cross at the Palace Gate, although this might have been at the very beginning of his reign, before he turned to iconoclasm, as P. Magdalino argues, “The Other Image at the Palace Gate and the Visual Propaganda of Leo III,” in *Byzantine Religious Culture: Studies in Honor of Alice-Mary Talbot*, ed. D. Sullivan, E. Fisher, and S. Papaioannou (Leiden and Boston, 2012), 139–53. See also Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 102–3, 128–35.

exchange, the Jew promised him a long reign, although the caliph actually died soon after the promulgation of his edict. However, his ban on images provided the “Saracen-minded” Leo III with a pattern for starting iconoclasm.¹²

This widespread story, circulated by the iconodules at the council of Nicaea II in 787, was long considered authentic in its main lines by modern research, so that even an approximate dating was given to the edict (ca. 721). However, some scholars, especially Byzantinists, have more recently questioned the historicity of Yazid’s decree, rejecting it as an etiological forgery and stressing its clearly legendary flavor.¹³ For them the principle of “cui prodest” has provided a likely explanation of the genesis of the legend, for it was to the benefit of the iconodules to connect the outbreak of iconoclasm with the archetypical foes of the Empire, the Arabs, instead of looking to internal reasons as the cause of the crisis. According to this interpretation, it is only the lack of iconoclast sources that prevents us from balancing iconodule propaganda with a more accurate assessment of the origins of Byzantine iconoclasm, which would thus have nothing to do with contemporary Islamic influence,¹⁴ but with the old and persistent aniconism of the Christian religion.¹⁵

On the other hand, there has also been, especially among Arabists, a general tendency to credit the historicity of Yazid’s decree¹⁶ and to look for a historical

¹² For a complete review of the sources, see A. A. Vasiliev, “The Iconoclastic Edict of the Caliph Yazid II, A.D. 721,” *DOP* 9–10 (1956): 25–47.

¹³ See, for example, the influential book of S. Gerö, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Leo III, with Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources*, CSCO 346, Subsidia 41 (Louvain, 1973), 59–84; or the study of P. Speck, *Ich bin’s nicht, Kaiser Konstantin ist es gewesen*, Ποικίλα βυζαντινά 10 (Bonn, 1990).

¹⁴ Thus O. Grabar, “Islam and Iconoclasm,” in *Iconoclasm: Papers Given at the 9th Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, March 1975*, ed. A. Bryer and J. Herrin (Birmingham, 1977), 45–52; or idem, *L’iconoclasme* (n. 2 above), 146–50. More recently, Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 115, hold that “there is no contemporary evidence for Islamic influence on Byzantine iconoclasm.”

¹⁵ For the preiconoclast stage in the cult of images, see n. 2 above.

¹⁶ See P. Crone, “Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 59–95; S. H. Griffith, “Images, Islam, and Christian Icons: A Moment in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in Early Islamic Times,” in *La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam VII^e–VIII^e siècles: Actes du colloque international Lyon–Maison de l’Orient méditerranéen, Paris–Institut*

core within the “legendary” details of Leo’s conversion to iconoclasm.¹⁷ As Patricia Crone wrote, more than thirty years ago, “Byzantine Iconoclasm was a response to the rise of Islam.”¹⁸ According to this interpretation, increasing criticism of the Christians for their worship of icons, first in the seventh century by the Jewish communities of the Middle East, then in the eighth by their new Muslim overlords, did at last affect the attitude toward the veneration of holy images in the Byzantine Empire itself.

With the Arabists, I am convinced of the historicity of an edict of Yazid against images, if not in all its legendary details (the promise of the Jew for a long reign), at least in its core. The great number of sources—from many countries and in many different languages—that independently transmit the story exclude the possibility that it was modelled on fictional hearsay or concocted by later iconodule propaganda.¹⁹ Definitive evidence for the decree of Yazid is to be found in an examination of historical context, as Sydney Griffith has demonstrated in several contributions:²⁰ the decree

du monde arabe, 11–15 Septembre 1990, ed. P. Canivet and J. P. Rey-Coquais (Damascus, 1992), 121–38; and Griffith, “Iconophilia and Iconophobia” (n. 9 above).

17 See, for example, S. H. Griffith, “Bashir/Bēsēr: Boon Companion of the Byzantine Emperor Leo III: The Islamic Recension of His Story in Leiden Oriental MS 951(2),” *Le Muséon* 103 (1990): 293–327 (repr. in idem, *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic* [Aldershot, 2002], no. XI), who comments upon an Arabic source in which the Syrian renegade Bashir, boon companion of Leo III and the main supporter of his iconoclast policy, holds a discussion with an Arab prisoner about some details of the Christian faith. This text confirms the historicity of the renegade Βησήρ, mentioned by Theophanes as the inspirer of Leo III’s iconoclasm; see *Theophanes: Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 402, 405, and 414.

18 Crone, “Iconoclasm” (n. 16 above), 59; this article is very suggestive in its first part, but the argumentation of 74–95 about the identity of Athinganoi, Judeo-Christians, and Sabbatians is less convincing.

19 Further confirmation of the historicity of the edict is provided by a Syrian disputation with an Arab emir dated to 720–21, which deals with icon worship. For the text, see G. Reinink, “The Veneration of Icons, the Cross, and the Bones of the Martyrs in an Early East-Syrian Apology against Islam,” in *Bibel, Byzanz und christlicher Orient: Festschrift für Stephen Gerö zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. D. Bumazhnov et al., *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 187 (Leuven, 2011), 329–42, and below in §10.

20 S. H. Griffith, “Theodore Abū Qurrah’s Arabic Tract on the Christian Practice of Venerating Images,” *JAO* 105 (1985): 53–73, esp. 62–65; idem, “Images” (n. 16 above), 122–31; and idem, “Iconophilia and Iconophobia” (n. 9 above), 349–53. A

was but the last step in a well-documented process undertaken by several Umayyads to unify the caliphate and suppress any outward sign of particularism among its Christian subjects. The monetary reforms in the caliphate of ‘Abd al-Mālik (685–705), the passing of the administration from Greek to Muslim hands during the reign of Walid I (705–715),²¹ the suppression of taxes for converts by the caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (717–720),²² all of these measures tended to homogenize the caliphate and overcome the differences among its subjects. In particular, ‘Umar’s measure permitted access to power to non-Arab Muslims,²³ thus encouraging the conversion of Christians to Islam. Although the Christian population remained in the majority during the eighth century in the conquered areas of Palestine and Syria, the Islamization of society progressed slowly but steadily, especially after the Abbasid revolution brought the Persian Muslims to power and put an end to the “Arab Empire.”²⁴ It is thus not unreasonable to

similar exploration of the decree in its cultural context is presented by M. Guidetti, “L’Editto di Yazid II: immagini et identità religiosa nel Bilad al-Sham dell’VIII secolo,” in *L’VIII secolo: Un secolo inquieto*, ed. V. Pace (Cividale del Friuli, 2010), 69–79.

21 See, for example, the *Chronicle of 1234*, in *Anonymi auctoris Chronicum ad A.C. 1234 pertinens*, ed. J. B. Chabot, CSCO 81 (= *Scriptores Syri* 36) and CSCO 82 (= *Scriptores Syri* 37) (Louvain, 1916), 1:298–99; trans. J. B. Chabot, in *Anonymi Auctoris Chronicum ad A.C. 1234 pertinens*, CSCO 109 (= *Scriptores Syri* 56) (Louvain, 1937), 233: “Walid, the king of Tayyāyē [Arabs], ordered that in his chancery, i.e., the treasury, which these Tayyāyē call the *dīwān*, one should not write in Greek, but in the Arabic language, because up to that time the ledgers of the kings of the Tayyāyē were in Greek.”

22 H. A. R. Gibb, “The Fiscal Rescript of ‘Umar II,” *Arabica* 2 (1955): 1–16, includes an English translation and commentary of the rescript of the caliph ‘Umar II, where such fiscal measures are detailed. The first measure to be listed after the prologue is the following: “Wherefore, whosoever accepts al-Islām, whether Christian or Jew or Magian, of those who are now subject to the *gizya*, and who joins himself to the body of the Muslims in their abode, and who forsakes his abode wherein he was before, he shall enjoy all the privileges of the Muslims and shall be subject to all the duties laid upon them” (3).

23 Is it only a coincidence that John of Damascus resigned his post in the administration of the caliphs at Damascus at precisely this time?

24 D. C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge, 1950), was the first to establish a link between taxation and conversion, considering the regional differences. R. W. Bulliet, *Conversions to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), developed a statistical method based on the names of the population. He proposed different dates, according to the regions, for the completion of the primary conversion

suppose that many Christians, even if they did not convert to Islam, at least tried to accommodate to the customs of their Muslim overlords by avoiding any offence or confrontation. Some might even have tried to somehow reconcile their own religion with that of their new rulers, if not in matters of dogma, at least in outward appearance. The move to override differences in cult might have been especially marked in image worship, for there was, in fact, a shared tradition of “iconophobia” in the two religions.

Accordingly, Yazid's decree, although it did not aim directly at the conversion of Christian subjects, would have been another stone put in the way of the free practice of their faith. However, to speak of a cause-and-effect relationship between Yazid's decree and the outbreak of Iconoclasm in Byzantium is a very different matter, for we must prove, in the first instance, that the caliphate issued a ban not just against *images*, but against *icon worship* among the Eastern Christians. If this were the case, the decree would have had a large impact on the religious practices of Christians in Syria and Palestine, as well as of those within the Byzantine frontiers, just as the Council of 787 intended when it presented Leo III as inspired by Yazid's decree.²⁵ Moreover, such a reconstruction would provide substantial evidence for the existence of icon worship among Eastern Christians, which is the main concern of this article. Nevertheless, things appear to have been very different from what iconodule Byzantines claimed in 787, for most of the texts that inform us about Yazid's decree carefully avoid mentioning “holy icons” as the target of the caliph's fury, but speak more generally of a ban on “images.” Consider, for example, the nar-

process. Especially interesting are his conclusions on Iraq (80–91) and Syria (104–13), where the Muslims became 50 percent of the population by the third quarter of the ninth century. See the review of M. G. Morony, “The Age of Conversions: A Reassessment,” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. M. Gervers and R. J. Bikhazi, *Papers in Medieval Studies* 9 (Toronto, 1990), 135–50. For conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine, see N. Levzion, “Conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine and the Survival of Christian Communities,” in Gervers and Bikhazi, *Conversion*, 289–311. For a connection between apocalyptic expectations among Christians for an early end to Abbasid power and the increasing rate of conversions to Islam, see J. Signes Codoñer, *The Emperor Theophilos and the East* (Farnham, 2013), chap. 24.

²⁵ Mansi, 13:196–200 (= E. Lambertz, *Concilium Universale Nicaenum Secundum*, ACO, ser. 2, vol. 3, pars altera, 588–96).

tive of events, as preserved in the acts of the Council of Nicaea. John, the legate of the apostolic thrones of the East, is the speaker. When he describes the nature of Yazid's decree, he says that the Jewish magician who had advised the caliph on this matter pushed him to issue an encyclical letter throughout the Empire:

“... to the effect that every representational painting, whether on tablets or in wall-mosaics, on sacred vessels or on altar coverings, and all such objects as are found in Christian churches, be destroyed and thoroughly abolished, nay, also representations of all kinds that adorn and embellish the market-places of cities.” It was moved by satanic wickedness that the false prophet added “every likeness,” contriving thereby to make unsuspected his hostility against us.²⁶

The passage has neither an explicit reference to “holy icons,” nor even to “icons.” The words used, εἰκονική διαζωγράφησις²⁷ or ὁμοιώματα, are carefully chosen for their diffuse meaning. Indeed, John, the narrator, feels obliged to gloss the term ὁμοιώματα to make it clear that the images of the Christian were targeted by the decree, although the Jew concealed his real purpose to the caliph. Only when the narrative continues is it said that the caliph actually destroyed “the holy icons and all other representations” (τὰς ἀγίας εἰκόνας καὶ λοιπὰ ὁμοιώματα), but even then the icons are presented as being simply a part of the larger body of images.

²⁶ Mansi, 13:197D–E (= Lambertz, *Concilium*, pars altera, 594.1–7): “... ὥστε πᾶσαν εἰκονικὴν διαζωγράφησιν, εἴτε ἐν σανίσιν εἴτε διὰ μουσείων ἐν τοῖχοις εἴτε ἐν σκεύεσιν ἵεροις καὶ ἐνδυτοῖς θυσιαστηρίων καὶ δσα τοιαῦτα εὑρίσκεται, ἐν πάσαις ταῖς τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἐκκλησίαις ἀφανίσται καὶ τελέως καταλῦσται, οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ δσα ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς τῶν πόλεων κατὰ κόσμον εἰσὶ καὶ εὐπρέπειαν οἰαδήποτε δμοιστητι.” Σατανικῷ δὲ κακουργήματι κινούμενος δ ψευδόμαντις προσέθηκε, “πᾶν δμοίωμα,” ἀνυφόρατον δεῖξαι τὴν πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἔχθραν μηχανώμενος. The translation is by Vasiliev, “Iconoclastic Edict” (n. 12 above), 29.

²⁷ The nominal expression εἰκονικὴ διαζωγράφησις is apparently a unicum, although we find the very similar phrase εἰκονικὴ ἀναζωγράφησις once in Stephen the Deacon (M.-F. Auzépy, ed., *La vie d'Étienne le Jeune par Étienne le diacre*, BBOM 3 [Aldershot, 1997], §29), as well as thrice in the spurious letter to the emperor Theophilos attributed to John of Damascus (see J. A. Munitiz et al., *The Letter of the Three Patriarchs to Emperor Theophilos and Related Texts* [Camberley, 1997], 85.5, 185.15, and 205.9, with translation).

Accordingly, as the text stands, it appears as if the connection between icon worship and the ban on images by Yazid was made only secondarily and with the purpose of linking the episode with Byzantine iconoclasm. The silence of the text on actual icon worship, if it does not amount to an *argumentum ex silentio*, is at least revealing of the different natures of the two phenomena. But what could have been then Yazid's purpose, if Christian icons were not primarily targeted? The archaeological evidence may now provide us with a clue.

2. Iconophobia among the Melkites

What is usually labelled as "iconophobia" is well attested in the churches of Palestine during the eighth century and consists in the widespread, although not systematic, removal of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures on pavement mosaics. Two aspects of this evidence are crucial. First, the removal of the images can be dated precisely to our period, in contrast with some other instances of destruction or mutilation of holy icons painted on the walls of churches (for example, in Cappadocia), which probably originated much later. Second, it was probably carried out not by Muslims but by the Christians themselves, for it was done carefully, with the intention of preserving the surrounding mosaic. There are even instances where a partial reconstruction of the destroyed figure has been attempted. Susanna Ognibene, working mainly in the famous church of Saint Stephen of Umm al-Rasāṣ, collected all the available evidence (more extensive than previously supposed) and proved that most of the mosaics were reconstructed with care almost immediately after the removal of the images, sometimes even using the same tesserae of the original mosaic. She dates this instance of "iconophobia" between ca. 718–720 and ca. 760.²⁸

²⁸ S. Ognibene, *Umm Al-Rasas: La chiesa di Santo Stefano ed il «problema iconofobico»* (Rome, 2002). For an interpretation of Eastern "iconophobia," see also Schick, *Christian Communities* (n. 9 above); M. Picirillo, "Iconofobia o iconoclastia nelle chiese di Giordania?" in *Bisanzio e l'Occidente: Arte, archeologia, storia; Studi in onore di Fernanda de' Maffei* (Rome, 1996), 173–86; idem, *L'Arabia cristiana: Dalla provincia imperiale al primo periodo islamico* (Milan, 2002), 243–48; Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era* (n. 2 above), 105–17 and 232–34; and F. B. Flood, "Christian Mosaics in Early Islamic Jordan and Palestine: A Case of Regional Iconoclasm," in *Byzantium and Islam* (n. 2 above), 117–21.

As the first date is close to the supposed issue of Yazid's ban on images, it might serve as a partial confirmation of its existence. The end date might, in turn, be connected with the end of the Umayyad caliphate and the subsequent abandonment of Syria and Damascus for Iraq as the center of the Islamic empire, resulting perhaps in diminished control of the central government over the activities of the local population—in our case, the Syrian and Melkite Christians.

This evidence would confirm that it was due to Muslim pressure that the destruction or removal of figurative mosaics from the pavement of the churches took place. Ognibene even points to the shared use of churches by Christians and Muslims as one of the causes for the removal of images considered offensive to Islam.²⁹ This phenomenon has been carefully studied by Suliman Bashear, who proved convincingly that early Muslim rulers prayed in Christian churches.³⁰ There were even contemporary treatises, especially among the Shi'a, that discussed the ways in which preaching in Christian churches was permitted, with frequent reference to the presence of images in them. To cite just one case, in several stories collected in the *Kitab al-Mahāsin*, an encyclopaedia of knowledge for the Shi'a written by al-Barqī in the first half of the ninth century, the representation of trees in churches is permitted, the existence of pictures in private houses is justified, and prayer with pictures or statues on the right or left, or behind or under one's legs (but not in front of the worshipper, in which case they should be covered) is conceded.³¹ Unfortunately, no indication about any religious nature of the images is given.

However, although the pressure of Islam might well have triggered the outbreak of "iconophobia" attested in the mosaics of the Palestinian churches, we must not rule out that disputes among Christians over image worship had their own internal dynamics.

²⁹ Ognibene, *Umm Al-Rasas*, 102.

³⁰ S. Bashear, "Qibla Musharriqa and Early Muslim Prayer in Churches," *The Muslim World* 81 (1991): 267–82.

³¹ Bashear, "Qibla Musharriqa," 280. For Al-Barqī, see *EI² suppl.* (2004), s.v. 'al-Barkī'; also A. Nasr al-din al-Azhari, ed., *Abd al-Razzaq ibn Hammam al-San'ani, Al-Musannaf*, vol. 1 (Beirut, 2000), hadiths nos. 1608, 1610, and 1611, prohibiting Muslims from entering churches if there are images inside. I thank John Lamoreaux for the reference. See also D. van Reenen, "The *Bilderverbot*, A New Survey," *Der Islam* 61 (1990): 27–77, for a study on hadiths prohibiting icon worship.

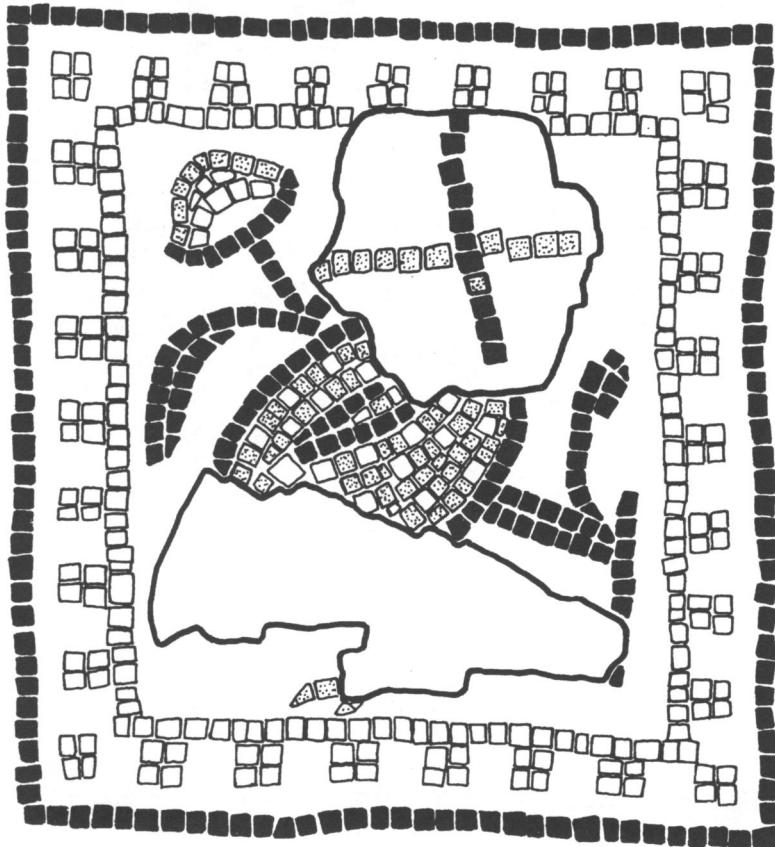


FIG. 1

Damaged mosaic of a bird in the Church of Saint Stephen of Umm al-Raṣāṣ (from Ognibene, *Umm Al-Rasas*, Scheda S16).

For example, some of the profane images that were destroyed had, in fact, a symbolic meaning, which could be misinterpreted by Christian believers. This was precisely the concern of canon 82 of the Council of Trullo, which prohibited the symbolic representation of Christ as a lamb in order to avoid confusion.³² The drawing of a cross in the place of a destroyed animal head, recorded by Ognibene in two instances, may attest to the symbolic value of the original figure and prove that its reconsecration to the Christian faith was made so as to prevent any misunderstanding on the part of the believers. If the figure of a bird partially preserved in a mosaic in the church of Umm al-Raṣāṣ is, indeed, a peacock, as Ognibene claims (fig. 1), it is easy to see why its head and tail were removed and replaced by a

cross (even reusing the same tesserae), for peacocks (like other birds) have always been understood as a symbol of Paradise. This removal or destruction of symbolic figures did not necessarily follow in accordance with the canon 82 of the Council in Trullo, whose implementation or even circulation among Eastern Christians is, to say the least, an undecided question. Rather, canon 82 of Trullo might have endorsed a previous general mistrust toward symbolic images.

Furthermore, the existence of profane images in Christian churches could always have been understood as a kind of idolatry, for they did not represent either saints or the Divinity, unlike holy icons. The placement of these profane images on the floor, where they were stepped on by the believers, certainly prevented them from being worshipped, and stressed rather their decorative function, in contrast to the icons of the saints and of Christ, which were, perhaps, put on the side walls and

³² Schick, *Christian Communities*, 201, is skeptical about this interpretation.

even, eventually, in the altar area.³³ Nevertheless, this figurative decoration with plants, animals, and profane and symbolic figures could have been deemed in some Christian circles as too profane to be admitted into the church, even on its pavement. It was, indeed, the kind of decoration used for private houses and palaces of the period, but not allowed in sacred places. This distinction is well documented in contemporary Islam, where figurative decoration is present in the Umayyad palaces but not in the mosques, where only geometric patterns and plants were admitted. We can, for example, mention the famous mosaics of Quṣayr ‘Amra in Jordan, which present a detailed iconographic program, carried out by Greek artists, consisting of sparsely clothed or naked women, episodes of hunting and merrymaking, and an allegorical representation of six kings defeated by Islamic armies. One of these kings is Roderic, the Visigoth King of Spain, who lost his life and reign to the Arabs in 711, which then sets the terminus post quem for the creation of the mosaics. Curiously enough, the mosaics appear to be almost contemporary with the caliphate of Yazid II (720–724), who was, as we have seen, credited in the Greek sources with an iconoclast edict.³⁴

The changing approach to the images according to their function and their place was not restricted to Islam, for the Iconoclast emperors seemed to favor profane figurative decoration in their palaces as well. The *Life of Stephen the Younger* attests that the iconoclasts destroyed the sacred images “but if it was about images of trees, birds and irrational animals, and especially about the satanic horse races, hunting parties and scenes of the theatre or of the hippodrome, they considered them with respect and made them brighten up.”³⁵

33 Canon 73 of the Council in Trullo forbade the representation of the cross on the floors of churches, where it might be stepped on, see Nedungatt and Featherstone, *Council in Trullo* (n. 7 above), 155; G. Peers, “Crosses’ Work Underfoot: Christian Spolia in the Late Antique Mosque at Shirkat in the Negev Desert (Israel),” *Eastern Christian Art* 8 (2011): 101–19.

34 G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), 143–49; and idem, *Quṣayr ‘Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004).

35 Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger* §26 (ed. Auzépy): εἰ δε ἡν δένδρα ή ὄρνεα ή ἵψα ήλογα, μάλιστα δὲ τὰ συτανικὰ ιππηλάσια, κυνήγια, θέατρα καὶ ιπποδρόμια ἀνιστορημένα, ταῦτα τιμητικῶς ἐναπονέμειν καὶ ἐκλαμπρύνεσθαι (my translation). Stephen’s reference at §64 to an image of a charioteer in the Milion is

Moreover, the iconoclasts seemed to include images of plants and animals in churches. Again, the *Life of Stephen the Younger* states in a subsequent passage that Constantine V held the synod of Hiereia at the Church of the Blachernai, where he had removed the icon of Christ and substituted images of animals and plants for it.³⁶ This kind of figurative representation in the iconoclast churches has not been preserved as a norm, but there is enough evidence, for instance, in peripheral areas like Naxos and Cappadocia,³⁷ to confirm that it was common practice in the period.

Therefore, theoretically, it could be that some Christians rejected the presence of profane images on the pavement of Palestinian churches out of displeasure with their promotion by contemporary “iconoclasts” (be they Muslims or Byzantines). However, this possibility supposes the transference into the Middle East of the patterns of the conflict as it developed in Byzantium; such a supposition should be avoided. Moreover, the only very gradual replacement after 843 of decoration

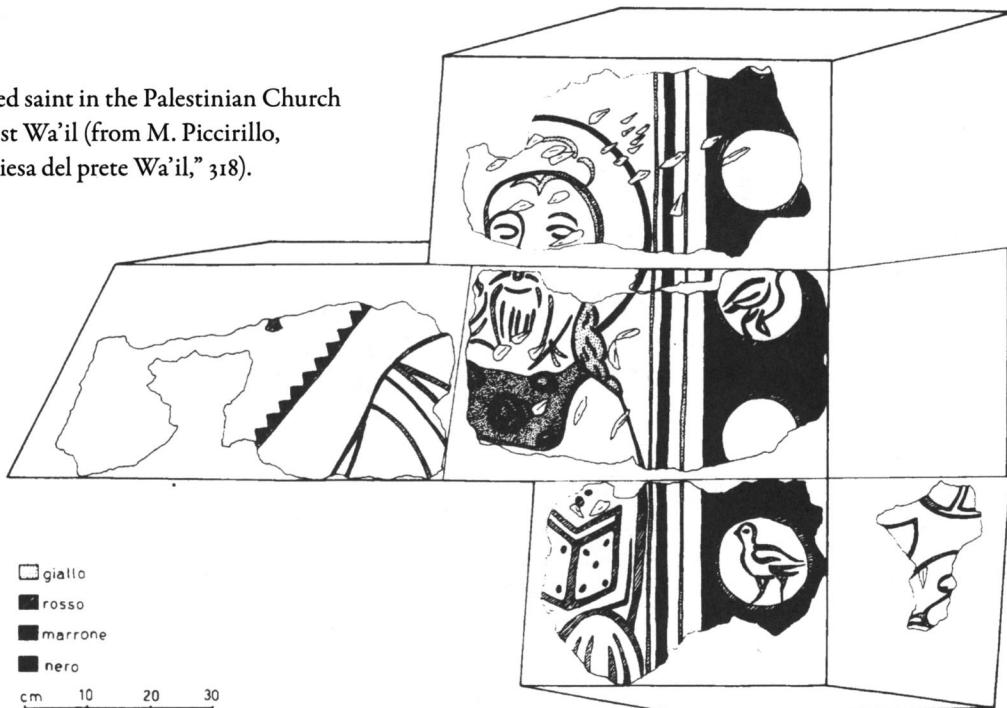
more problematic; see Auzépy, *Vie d’Étienne* (n. 27 above), 215 n. 174 and 265 n. 411.

36 Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger* §29 (ed. Auzépy): τὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἀπαντὰ μυστικὸ δέξαρας ὁ πωροφύλακιν καὶ δρυοσκοπεῖον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ἐποίησεν. δένδρα καὶ δρυεα παντοῖα, θηρία τε καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ ἐγκύκλια διὰ κισσοφύλλων, γεράνων τε καὶ κορωνῶν καὶ ταών ταύτην περιμουσώσας.

37 For Naxos, see A. Vasilaki, “Εἰκονομαχικὲς ἐκκλησίες στὴ Νάξο,” *Δελτ. Χριστ. Αρχ. Ετ.* 3 (1962–1963): 49–74; V. Christides, *The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs* (ca. 824) (Athens, 1984), 128–33; E. Malamut, *Les îles de l’empire Byzantin, VII^e–XII^e siècles* (Paris, 1988), 216–18, 568; M. Chatzidakis, N. Drandakis, N. Zias, M. Acheimastou-Potamianou, and A. Vasilaki-Karakatsani, *Naxos* (Athens, 1989), esp. the contributions of Zias, 30–49, and Acheimastou-Potamianou, 50–65; Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era* (n. 2 above), 25–28; and A. Mitsani, “Η χορηγία στις Κυκλαδες ἀπὸ τὸν 60 μέχρι τὸν 140 αιώνα,” *Επ. Ετ. Βυζ. Σπ.* 52 (2004–2006): 391–46, esp. 395–96 (with further bibliography in Greek). For Cappadocia, see A. W. Epstein, “The ‘Iconoclast’ Churches of Cappadocia,” in Bryer and Herrin, *Iconoclasm* (n. 14 above), 103–12; N. Thierry, “Le culte de la croix dans l’empire Byzantin du VI^e siècle au X^e siècle dans ses rapports avec la guerre contre l’infidèle: Nouveaux témoignages archéologiques,” *RSBS* 1 (1980): 205–28; eadem, “L’iconoclasme en Cappadoce d’après les sources archéologiques: Origines et modalités,” in *Rayonnement Grec: Hommages à Charles Delvoye*, ed. L. Hademann-Misguich and G. Raepsaet (Brussels, 1982), 389–403; eadem, “La Cappadoce de l’Antiquité au Moyen Âge,” *MéL Rome* 10 (1988): 892–97; eadem, *La Cappadoce de l’antiquité au moyen âge* (Turnhout, 2002), 135–42; C. Jolivet-Lévy, *Les églises byzantines de Cappadoce: Le programme iconographique de l’abside et de ses abords* (Paris, 1991), 335–37; and eadem, *La Cappadoce, mémoire de Byzance* (Paris, 1997), 37–41.

FIG. 2

A seated saint in the Palestinian Church of Priest Wa'il (from M. Piccirillo, "La chiesa del prete Wa'il," 318).



in iconoclastic churches by figurative representations of Christ and the saints is a warning against easy assumptions of systematic replacement of decoration in churches as a consequence of internal strife.³⁸

On the other hand, we must consider whether the presence of profane images on church pavements is really compatible with the worship of holy icons (either as icon paintings on the walls or as portable icons) in these same buildings and by the same "iconodule" Christians who might have destroyed the representation of the floor mosaics. After all, floor pictures and holy icons are not conceptualized either as equivalent or as contradictory phenomena. We are not speaking of erasing a cross in the apse and putting an image on it (or the other way around), as occurred in some churches of the Byzantine Empire.³⁹ Moreover, as only the floor mosaics have been preserved, it is practically a *petitio principii* to guess at the existence of icon paintings on the walls.

³⁸ See, for example, Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 294–97, for the iconoclastic cross in the apse of Saint Sophia of Thessalonike, which remained untouched for almost two centuries.

³⁹ Ibid., 199–212.

In fact, as far as I know, only a single holy image has been excavated from the ruins of the lavishly decorated Palestinian churches of the period (for Egypt, however, see §10, below). It is the painted figure of a seated saint with a nimbus above and a book in his left hand. It has been preserved in the plaster of four blocks of stone from the apsidal half-dome of the Palestinian Church of the Priest *Oualelos* (Wa'il) in Umm al-Raṣāṣ.⁴⁰ The bearded saint is surrounded by medallions of birds and shows traces of being damaged by a pickaxe (fig. 2).

The Church of the Priest *Oualelos* is easily dated to 586 through the mosaic inscription on the floor, which was made at the request of the so-called presbyter (*σπουδῇ Οὐαλέσου πρεσβυτέρου*). But we do not know when the half-dome of the apse was painted over with the image of a saint; it might even have been centuries later. As the four blocks with the painted image "miraculously" preserved on them were found

⁴⁰ For the painting and the excavations in this church, see M. Piccirillo, "La chiesa del prete Wa'il a Umm al-Rasas—Kastron Mefaa in Giordania," in *Early Christianity in Context: Monuments and Documents*, ed. F. Manns and E. Alliata (Jerusalem, 1993), 313–34.



FIG. 3 Inscription on the pavement of the Church of the Virgin in Madaba (from M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, ed. P. M. Bikai and T. A. Dailey, American Center of Oriental Research Publications 1 [Amman, 1993], 15).

fallen on the ground, it is difficult to reconstruct a context for them and for the “iconoclast” who tried to efface the image—and who may well have lived in a much later period.

Further evidence for the existence of holy icons in the Palestinian churches is perhaps provided by a famous mosaic inscription of the Church of the Virgin in Madaba. The inscription, built into a medallion, is part of a geometrical mosaic that decorates the pavement of the church. It is placed near the altar, in the middle of the church. Its text may be translated as follows: “You who look [δερκόμενος] at Mary, virginal

Mother of God, and to Christ whom she generated, Universal King, only son of the only God, purify your mind [νόον], flesh, and works and, with purest prayers [εὐχαῖς], the people of God itself” (fig. 3). According to Michele Piccirillo, the inscription must refer to an image or icon of the Virgin with child placed on the altar and worshipped by the Christian community, for this icon “provides the hermeneutical basis for the reading of the inscription.”⁴¹

41 M. Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba*, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Collectio Maior 34 (Jerusalem, 1989), 48–50.

The pavement of this church has been recently dated to 767, due to a reinterpretation of a square dedicatory inscription on the pavement, near the round one.⁴² If, accordingly, the purely geometric pattern and layout of the mosaic could be explained as a result of the increasing pressure of Muslim authorities against Christian images, how would we then understand the—until now unparalleled—reference to an icon of the Virgin in the round mosaic inscription? Perhaps, as Leah di Segni noticed, we must take into consideration the “strong apologetic tone” of the inscription “that may be best be explained precisely by a controversial background.” Nor do I exclude the possibility that the reference to the “vision” of the Virgin and her child referred to a form of noetic contemplation provoked by the dedication of the Church. Indeed, the person addressed by the inscription is urged to purify his mind (*vóiov*) through his prayers.⁴³

The archaeological evidence so far adduced does not allow us to know whether the ecclesiastical authorities in Palestine promoted, tolerated, or even condemned icon worship in their respective churches before the iconoclast decree of Yazid or the outbreak of iconoclasm in Constantinople, nor even to know the extent or location of their actions.⁴⁴ No connection between “iconoclasm” in the caliphate and Byzantium can be established, a point that has been strongly argued by Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon in their recent book.⁴⁵ Now, if their argument holds force, we

should consequently maintain that icon worship could not have been practiced in a similar way in both areas, especially because the definition and conceptualization of icon worship in Byzantium did not precede, but followed, the struggle over the images, as Brubaker and Haldon have sufficiently proven.⁴⁶ A further problem, however, follows: Melkite writers deal with the issue of icon worship at some length. We must now consider this evidence.

3. The Case of John of Damascus

John of Damascus⁴⁷ wrote the three treatises of *Against Iconoclasts* in Greek between the alleged outbreak of iconoclasm in 726 with Leo III and 754, when the iconoclast council of Hieria issued four anathemas against him for his support of images.⁴⁸ The textual tradition of the three treatises is not unproblematic, for they are, in fact, not three autonomous compositions, but three different reworkings of the same treatise, with common passages and new materials added according to the different addressees; John apparently “plagiarized himself.”⁴⁹ Bonifatius Kotter made a synoptic edition of the three texts with parallel columns, merging even the parallel texts into one when their wording was identical.⁵⁰ As there is reason to think that at least the florilegia that accompanied the three treatises—and from which John supposedly obtained some of his arguments—were expanded and interpolated after his death (as is usual in such open genres),⁵¹ one wonders whether

⁴² L. di Segni, “The Date of the Church of the Virgin in Madaba,” *Liber Annuus* 42 (1992): 251–57 and figs. 1–4, at pl. 25–26. See Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba*, 22–23 and 280–81, for similar dedicatory medallions in mosaics, dated to 603 and 586. Piccirillo also dated the inscription of the Church of the Virgin to the end of the sixth or beginning of the seventh century (50).

⁴³ Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 231–32, argue that the inscription “could equally well refer to spiritual rather than physical sight.”

⁴⁴ One clue is provided by Ognibene, *Umm Al-Rasas*, 112–13, who observes that the mosaics of the monasteries appear to have been better preserved than those of the city churches, although it remains uncertain whether this was due to the isolation of the monastic buildings or to the iconodule tendencies of the Palestinian monks.

⁴⁵ Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 113–15, argue that Byzantine and East Christian iconoclasms were two different phenomena. For the different “versions” of Iconoclasm, see L. Brubaker, “Eighth-Century Iconoclasms: Arab, Byzantine, Carolingian, and Palestinian,” in *ANAOHMATA EOPTIKA: Studies in Honor of Thomas F. Matthews*, ed. J. D. Alchhermes, H. C. Evans, and Th. K. Thomas (Mainz, 2009), 73–81.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 63: “What we might legitimately call a cult of images did not lead to iconoclasm; it was generated by the discourse of the debate about iconoclasm itself.”

⁴⁷ See A. Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford, 2002; repr. 2004), for a comprehensive study of this figure.

⁴⁸ Mansi, 13:356 C–D.

⁴⁹ Louth, *Damascene*, 197–98; see, also, 210–11 for the sources upon which the Damascene built up his three treatises on the icons.

⁵⁰ B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, 5 vols., Patristische Texte und Studien 7, 12, 17, 22, 29 (Berlin and New York, 1969–88), 3:65–200.

⁵¹ Louth, *Damascene*, 209–13. Matthews, “Vrt’anēs K’ert’ol” (n. 5 above), 120–22, suggests that the Damascene may have had contact with Armenians in Jerusalem who supplied him with details of Vardanes’ arguments against the iconoclasts. Deroche, “L’Apologie” (n. 4 above), already noticed the literal borrowings of the Damascene from Leontios. Since the Damascene himself freely borrowed

this later reworking of the texts was limited to the appended catalogue of patristic quotations or whether it also affected some arguments of the treatises themselves. Indeed, it is not common in the history of textual transmission to deal with three authorial versions of the same text. And the temptation to round off the arguments of John of Damascus must have been very high, considering the authoritative character of his works in iconodule milieux, which was achieved to a great extent through the four anathemas issued against him by the emperor Constantine V at the Council of Hieria.

This anathema must also have implied some kind of *damnatio memoriae* for the writer and his works until 787, when the restoration of the icons took place at Nicaea II. In fact, neither the acts of Nicaea II nor such important iconodule authors of the beginning of the ninth century as the patriarch Nicephorus or Theodore of Stoudios seem to be aware of the arguments of the Damascene. Certainly, the chronicle of Theophanes singles out John among the defenders of the icons and names him *Chrysorrhoas* for his fluent tongue,⁵² though that epithet refers to his homilies and to his fame as a preacher.⁵³ No indication is given in the chronicle that his three treatises on the icons were read or known at the time.

A possible explanation for this silence is that the focus of the debate about the icons had shifted from questions about the kind of worship the icons deserved, a central issue for John, to a more complex christological approach, to which the work of our author had little to contribute.⁵⁴ But this is, in my opinion, an insufficient explanation for the general silence about John of Damascus' treatises on icons in the first generation of Byzantine iconodule writers after Nicaea II, nor does it explain his popularity at much later times, after the reintroduction of icon worship in 843. Rather, we should presuppose difficult access to the three treatises due to the emperor's ban in the years after John's death, which undoubtedly made it easy for any interpolator to modify his work without being noticed and to adapt it to the changing demands of readers. We must,

arguments and words from previous writers, he may not have considered his work entirely original, thus paving the way for the later interpolations.

52 Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 408, 417, and 428 (ed. de Boor).

53 Louth, *Damascene*, 224.

54 Ibid., 219–20.

then, read the three treatises on the icons by John of Damascus with the utmost caution when we draw conclusions about the impact of the issue on the Middle East in the eighth century.

This caution applies foremost to John's silence about any kind of iconoclasm in the Middle East.⁵⁵ In his treatises John appears to react only to the iconoclast outbreak in Constantinople, as if there were no debate or conflict about the icons in Palestine or Syria at his time. This is most evident in the second treatise, especially after chapter 12, which begins with a forceful sentence: οὐ βασιλέων ἐστὶ νομοθετεῖν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ. There, John heavily criticizes the emperor for meddling in the affairs of the Church and makes a defense of the legitimacy of the Church, as a power with the same rights as the Empire, to establish dogma. In this Two-Powers theory, certainly aimed at limiting the Isaurians from intervening in church affairs, John advanced arguments later adduced by several iconodule partisans, from Theodore of Stoudios to Photios himself.⁵⁶ This is not to say that this section of the second treatise on the icons was later interpolated, for the defense of the dogmatic authority of the Church by John of Damascus had Christian forerunners. Moreover, as a Christian living in the caliphate, John could speak about this matter with more freedom than most of his contemporaries in Byzantium.

The outspokenness of John's attack on the emperor in the second treatise on the icons is, however, surprising, considering his silence about the emperor in the first treatise, whose addressee is unknown. Emperor Leo III is named as ἄγριος καὶ ἀνήμερος in a passage that makes him responsible for the outbreak of the crisis.⁵⁷ It is possible that the first measures of Leo III against icon worship in 726 escalated some

55 In his *Expositio fidei* 4.16 = §89 (ed. Kotter, *Schriften*, 2:206–8), the Damascene also deals with the main problems of icon worship but again gives us no clue about the identity of the enemies of the images. The chapter begins in a very imprecise way, stating that “for some criticize us for worshipping and honoring the image of Our Savior and Our Lady...” (my translation).

56 See Photios's *Eisagoge*, in *Collectio librorum iuris Graeco-Romanis in editorum: Ecloga Leonis et Constantini, Epanagoge Basili, Leonis et Alexandri*, ed. K. E. Zachariä von Lingenthal (Leipzig, 1852), tit. II–III.

57 *Against Iconoclasts* II.18 (ed. Kotter, *Schriften*, 3:117).

years later with an imperial edict,⁵⁸ which, in turn, motivated the resignation of patriarch Germanos and the treatises of the Damascene. The recent research of Brubaker and Haldon has, however, almost ruled out the possibility that such an edict ever existed.⁵⁹ Yet it can still be asked whether this escalation of the conflict in Constantinople was serious enough to embolden a Palestinian monk to take up his pen against the emperor's iconoclast policy or whether the conflict had had side effects in the Melkite communities of the East.⁶⁰

A conclusion depends upon our ability to date the three treatises on the icons with some certainty. Paul Speck suggested that John of Damascus wrote them not during the reign of Leo III, as was generally assumed, but shortly before the iconoclast Council of Hiereia in 754.⁶¹ His conclusions are, for the most part, accepted by Brubaker and Haldon.⁶² This might provide the occasion for the composition of the three treatises, for it is possible that Constantine V claimed that the council was ecumenical (see immediately below), thus involving the eastern patriarchates in the debate on the icons. If, contrariwise, we do adhere to the early dating defended by Andrew Louth for the first two treatises (ca. 726–730),⁶³ we are bereft of this explanation, although this does not prevent us from supposing that the policy of the Isaurians on the icons did, indeed, have repercussions

⁵⁸ Certainly not the *Ecloga*, which promoted the Caesaropapist model for the Empire, as it was promulgated in 741, according to L. Burgmann, *Ecloga: Das Gesetzbuch Leons III. und Konstantinos' V.*, Forschungen zur byzantinischen Rechtsgeschichte 11 (Frankfurt am Main, 1988), 10–12, and not in 726, as Louth, *Damascene*, 204, states. For the *silentium* of 730 called by Leo III, see Theophanes, *Chronographia* 408–9 (ed. de Boor) (AM 6221).

⁵⁹ Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 117–27.

⁶⁰ Contrary to Louth, *Damascene*, Griffith, in his "Iconophilia and Iconophobia" (n. 9 above), 360–64 and "John of Damascus and the Church in Syria in the Umayyad Era: The Intellectual and Cultural Milieu of Orthodox Christians in the World of Islam," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 11, no. 2 (2008), interprets the work of the Damascene only as a Christian response to the challenges of Islam, without any concern for the religious problems of the Empire.

⁶¹ P. Speck, *Artabasdos, der rechtgläubige Vorkämpfer der göttlichen Lehre: Untersuchungen zur Revolte des Artabasdos und ihrer Darstellung in der byzantinischen Historiographie*, Ποικίλα Βυζαντίου 2 (Bonn, 1981), 209–24, argues that the second treatise of John of Damascus was written shortly before 754 and that, accordingly, Leo III was already dead when the Damascene accused him of initiating iconoclasm.

⁶² Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 183–89.

⁶³ Louth, *Damascene*, 208.

sions on the eastern "imperial" church, which was traditionally bound to Constantinople.

In this connection, it is significant that while the Council at Hiereia issued four severe anathemas against John of Damascus, it did not act against the Melkite patriarchs, who, we can surmise, did not endorse John's defense of the icons.⁶⁴ The silence of this council about the eastern patriarchs is even more intriguing,⁶⁵ as the acts of the council did anathematize patriarch Germanos and George of Cyprus,⁶⁶ among the supporters of the icons.

Furthermore, in connection with the outbreak of the crisis during the reign of Leo III, Theophanes singles out the patriarchs of Constantinople, the pope of Rome, and John of Damascus as the main iconodule leaders in their respective churches, without again mentioning the Melkite patriarchs of the east.⁶⁷ Suspicions are provoked, therefore, by the immediate addition of the chronicler: "John, together with the eastern bishops, subjected the impious man [Leo III] to anathema" (Ιωάννης σὺν τοῖς τῆς Ἀνατολῆς ἐπισκόποις τοῖς ἀναθέμαστο τὸν ἀσεβὴ καθυποβάλλει). Although the monk John had enough authority so as to appear to be the leader of the Melkites at the time (as Maximos did before him), he was certainly not entitled to issue any anathema. Moreover, a leading role for a monk in church councils was exceptional.⁶⁸

Certainly, Theophanes stresses that in the Council of Hiereia "none of the universal sees was represented, namely those of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem,"⁶⁹ but he is silent about the causes of this absence. Moreover, the acts of Nicaea insist on

⁶⁴ If the Damascene was anathematized only for his iconodulia. M.-F. Auzépy has suggested that John might have been involved in a conspiracy against the emperor: "De la Palestine à Constantinople (VIII^e–IX^e siècles): Étienne le Sabaïte et Jean Damascène," *TM* 12 (1994): 183–218, esp. 200–203 (repr. in eadem, *L'histoire des iconoclastes* [Paris, 2007], 221–57).

⁶⁵ Mansi, 13:356C and Theophanes, *Chronographia* 428 (ed. de Boor).

⁶⁶ For the identity of George, see Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 192 n. 163, and H.-G. Thümmel, *Die Konzilien zur Bilderfrage im 8. und 9. Jahrhundert: Das 7. ökumenische Konzil in Nikaia 787* (Paderborn, 2005), 57–60.

⁶⁷ Theophanes, *Chronographia* 408 (ed. de Boor) (AM 6221).

⁶⁸ Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 268–69, argue that the presence of monks at the Councils of Hiereia and Nicaea II was not a symptom of their importance as a unified "party."

⁶⁹ Theophanes 427–28 (ed. de Boor) (AM 6245).

denying the ecumenicity of the Hiereia Council, on the grounds that neither the pope nor the Oriental patriarchs nor their representatives were present.⁷⁰ However, in this same refutation, we also learn that the council was presented as the seventh ecumenical council by the emperor Constantine; the question immediately arises: how could the emperor claim that the council was ecumenical if no representatives of the oriental patriarchates were present?

We might surmise that the patriarchs were prevented by the caliphate from travelling to Constantinople, but this prohibition was by no means exceptional at the time and, in fact, they were present neither at Nicaea nor at later councils summoned in the ninth century. Several reasons can be adduced for their absence, first and foremost the internal troubles of the Melkite sees, but it is sufficient to note that the Melkite prelates needed authorization from the caliph to enter Byzantine territory on an official mission. The same difficulties applied to lesser representatives coming to Constantinople. Furthermore, emperors needed at least one year to send ambassadors to the Melkite patriarchates and receive an answer from them, although this process usually took much more time, for the patriarchs, in turn, needed to contact Muslim authorities and summon their clergy for consultation. Since such delays were highly inconvenient, other procedures evolved, which consisted mainly in investing legitimacy on members of the Melkite Church who happened to be present in Constantinople, either as visitors or as permanent residents. The Melkite legates present at the councils of 787, 867, and 869–70 were all appointed by the patriarch of Constantinople. Lacking legitimacy, they were all accused—and with some reason—in later councils of not having been chosen as representatives by the Melkite prelates for whom they claimed to act. In some cases, as in the council of 869–70, such fraud was even concocted with the understanding and support of local Arab emirs. At the council of 867, Photios passed off some leading members of the Italian clergy

as representatives of the papacy and probably did something similar with the Melkite representatives.⁷¹

It is against this background that we should judge the alleged absence of Melkite prelates at the Hiereia council. Whether the Melkite representatives who must have attended the Council of Hiereia in 754 were or were not legitimate, we will never know, although we can surmise that Constantine V did his best to present the council as formally ecumenical by means of a Melkite legation, exactly as patriarch Tarasios did in 787. Accordingly, the absence of true legates of the Melkite patriarchates at Hiereia (not to speak of the absence of the patriarchs themselves!) does not necessarily mean that they were staunch supporters of icon worship (see §4 below). Nor can the possibility be ruled out that the Melkite patriarchates might eventually have lent support to the emperor's policy against icon worship. Obviously, this does not mean that the Melkite prelates were committed iconoclasts, but only that they followed the policy established in Constantinople, insofar as it did not interfere too much with their own internal problems. This was the usual attitude of the imperial clergy, who obeyed the guidelines of the emperor and the highest hierarchy of the Church and who were prone to change sides as often as required. The best proof of that is the high level of consensus reached at every council among the Byzantine clergy against decisions taken by previous councils on the issue of images.⁷²

It remains to consider whether there could have been a council of the Melkite patriarchates ca. 730

71 For detailed arguments against the legitimacy of the Melkite legates at the council of Nicaea, see M.-F. Auzépy, *L'hagiographie et l'iconoclisme byzantin: Le cas de Étienne le Jeune*, BBOM 5 (Aldershot, 1999), 211–28, and R.-J. Lilie, *Byzanz unter Eirene und Konstantin VI. (780–802)*, BBA 2 (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), 66–70; and for the councils of 867 and 869–70, see J. M. Sansterre, “Les représentants des patriarcats au concile photien d'août-septembre 867,” *Byzantion* 43 (1973): 195–228; and J. Signes Codoñer, “Die melkitischen Patriarchen, Konstantinopel und der Bilderkult in der zweiten Hälfte des 9. Jahrhunderts: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung vom Brief 2 des Photios und dem sogenannten Brief der drei Patriarchen an Theophilos,” in *Zwei Sonnen am Goldenen Horn? Kaiserliche und patriarchale Macht im byzantinischen Mittelalter: Akten der internationalen Tagung vom 3. bis 5. November 2010; Zwei Teileände*, ed. M. Grünbart, L. Rickelt, and M. M. Vučetić, *Byzantinistische Texte und Studien* 3 (Münster, 2013), 97–134.

72 See, for example, Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 262–66, 372–85, 400–402.

70 Mansi, 13:208E–209A. Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger* §§28 and 44 (ed. Auzépy), repeats the same argumentation of the acts of Nicaea II and even their wording. In the preface to her edition of the *Life* (n. 27 above), Auzépy indicates that its author constantly makes use of the acts (7).

anathematizing Leo III, as the passage of Theophanes quoted above seems to imply.⁷³ Marie-France Auzépy drew attention some years ago to a passage in John of Damascus's letter about the Trisagion, where our author shows a close intimacy with the patriarch of Jerusalem.⁷⁴ She connected this circumstance with a synodical letter that the patriarch John of Jerusalem might have written ca. 730, a text she reconstructed from the nucleus of the (unedited) short version of the *Adversus Constantinum Caballinum* (CC). According to her analysis, the patriarch John sent this synodical letter to his other colleagues in order to make clear his support of the icons, whose worship was expressly defended in the definition of the faith with which the text started.⁷⁵ At least one copy reached Pope Gregory II and was expanded and interpolated with dialogic parts ca. 769 to form the short version of the CC. This version was again expanded ca. 785–87 into the (edited) long version of the CC.⁷⁶

Auzépy's reconstruction of the three textual stages of the CC is very convincing, although it takes for granted that the oriental patriarchs did, in fact, oppose Leo III in 730 on the issue of icons—which, in turn, makes likely the writing of a synodical letter in support of the images by the patriarch of Jerusalem. However, in the passage quoted by Auzépy, John of Damascus refers to the patriarch John only as his former master, whose lessons he attended as a student over the years. According to John of Damascus, the patriarch John could never have defended an interpretation of the Trisagion Hymn as applying only to Christ and not to the Trinity. Nothing in the passage suggests that both men acted together in any way against iconoclasts, especially as the patriarch was older and the master of the Damascene.

On the other hand, if the patriarch of Jerusalem did write a synodical letter in 730 about the images, one

73 Theophanes, *Chronographia* 408 (ed. de Boor) (AM 6221).

74 *De hymno trisagio* §26: Τίς γὰρ οἴδε τοῦ μακαριωτάτου Ἰωάννου τοῦ πατριάρχου νόμα ἐμοῦ πλέον; Οὐδεὶς. “Ος, ἵνα τάληθες εἰπω, οὐκ ἀνέπνευσε πνοὴν δογματικὴν πώποτε, ἢν ἐμοὶ ὡς μαθητῇ οὐκ ἀνέθετο. Τι μὴ ζῶντος καὶ φθεγγομένου τοῦ λεροῦ ἀνδρὸς ταῦτα περὶ αὐτοῦ λέλεκτο; (ed. Kotter, *Schriften*, 4:329).

75 This part of the original synodica has been preserved in the long version of the *Adversus Constantinum Caballinum* (PG 95:312–13).

76 M.-F. Auzépy, “L'adversus Constantinum Caballinum et Jean de Jérusalem,” *BSL* 56 (1995): 323–38 (repr. in Auzépy, *L'histoire* [n. 64 above], 59–75).

might have expected some reference to an anathema against Leo III, if this ever existed. Or, if the synodical letter was written even before the anathema was made, why did the text of the anathema not reach the pope? Why is there no mention of this anathema in the papal archives or in the bulky dossier of iconophile texts compiled by the Greek monks in Rome that provides a basis for *Parisinus Graecus 1115*?⁷⁷ This is surely an argument *ex silentio*, but nonetheless very forceful, especially if one takes into consideration the systematic production of texts in support of the icons in the Greek milieux of Rome during the first iconoclast period. How could the text of an anathema against Leo III by the oriental patriarchates not have been preserved? Perhaps because this anathema never existed. The recent, detailed reconstruction by Brubaker and Haldon of the first stages of the iconoclastic controversy also makes it highly improbable that a Melkite patriarch could have taken, so early, such a bold step against an emperor who adopted a very prudent policy against the cult of the images in the area of the altar.⁷⁸

The foregoing argument does not preclude the existence of a patriarchal, synodical letter from which the short and long versions of the CC were produced. But perhaps this letter was not as iconodule as Auzépy thinks. If the text were indeed interpolated and enlarged, as she has convincingly proven, I would suggest that is because the interpolator wanted to make it more useful for the iconodules, not only by making explicit some statements that were absent in the original version, but also by distorting its original meaning and purpose. This is exactly what happened with the *Letter to Theophilus* sent by the three Melkite patriarchs ca. 836, as I attempt to prove elsewhere.⁷⁹ In fact, if Auzépy is correct that the short and long versions of the CC were forged and even that “une falsification de document n’effrayait pas Rome à cette époque,”⁸⁰ why should we think that the original wording of a synodical letter of the patriarch of Jerusalem was faithfully preserved? On the other hand, even admitting that the patriarch of Jerusalem wrote a synodical letter in

77 For this dossier, see A. Alexakis, *Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115 and its Archetype* (Washington, DC, 1996).

78 Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 69–155. For the Lateran synod of 731, see §§ below.

79 Signes Codoñer, *Theophilus* (n. 24 above), chap. 21.

80 Auzépy, “L'adversus Constantinum” (n. 76 above), 332–33.

support of the images, we must consider whether he had the backing of a synod or not, whether he acted on his own or was contested by some other sectors of the Melkite church. The supposed synodical letter is not definitive proof of a unanimous or continuous defense of the icons in the Melkite church.

In sum, it cannot be proven that John of Damascus received substantial support from the Melkite patriarchs in his invectives against iconoclasts. Had this been the case, we would have expected the Melkite patriarchs to become the target of the iconoclast anathema of 754, rather than John himself. The possibility of an internal division among the Melkites on the issue of the icons must be proposed.⁸¹ But why does John not say a word about it?

The explanation that first comes to mind is that our saint opposed the ecclesiastical authorities of his time on this issue but did not mention names in order to avoid a direct confrontation. Again, this would not mean that the Melkite patriarchs were iconoclasts, only that they avoided taking sides in a conflict that they considered alien to their own communities, where different traditions concerning icon worship might well have peacefully coexisted until then. The prudent silence of the patriarchs in the face of John's outspoken invectives is all the more understandable if we consider that the Muslim authorities might have been behind the increasing ban on images in Christian churches from the beginning of the eighth century, as I have argued in §§1–2 above.

On the other hand, there already prevailed profound division among the Melkites at this time,⁸² so it is highly unlikely that all parties would stand behind John's radical ideas on icon worship, especially as such a stance would imply conflict with iconoclast emperors at Constantinople, the sponsors of the Chalcedonians in the face of the rival eastern Churches. Michael the Syrian, referring to the situation of the Melkite church at the beginning of the eighth century (and probably basing himself on the Jacobite patriarch Dionysius of

Tell Maḥrē, d. 848),⁸³ affirms that “it is impossible to enumerate or even to calculate how many anathemas, how many quarrels took place [among the Melkites] until now.” Michael is a biased source because of his hostility against the Melkites, but the details he provides are too specific to have been invented. His chronicle contains, in fact, a lengthy report about the new “schism” created among the Melkites by the late followers of Maximos Confessor (580–662),⁸⁴ who rejected the addition of the expression δούλων τοῦ θεοῦ to the Trisagion, which was otherwise customary among the Syrians of the time.⁸⁵ The conflict affected many sees of the Melkites, including Jerusalem, Edessa, Aleppo, and Antioch and, again probably according to the testimony of Tell Maḥrē, was triggered by the intervention of the father of John of Damascus, the influential Sergius ibn Manṣūr, who had a post in the caliphal administration in Damascus.⁸⁶

Although the “schism” is described in the chronicle of Michael the Syrian as a dogmatic conflict between the dyothelite Maximites (Chalcedonian followers of Maximos and of the sixth ecumenical council of 680–81 at Constantinople) and the monothelite Maronites (adherents of the monothelism named after the fifth-century Syrian monk St. Maron), it created a social divide among the Chalcedonians, for the chronicle says that the Maximites found adherents in the cities and in the hierarchy of the Melkite Church, whereas the Maronites were supported mainly by inhabitants of the countryside and by monks. As the

83 For the sources and transmission of the chronicle of Michael the Syrian, see D. Weltecke, “The World Chronicle by Patriarch Michael the Great (1126–1199): Some Reflections,” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 11 (1997): 6–29.

84 For Maximos, see A. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London, 2006).

85 The Syrians apparently understood the thrice-holy invocation of the Trisagion as addressed to the Son and, accordingly, saw no problem in the addition of the formula δούλων τοῦ θεοῦ. The Chalcedonian Greeks, in contrast, addressed the Trisagion to the Trinity and regarded this theopaschite addition, attributed to the Peter the Fuller (d. 488), as an intolerable heresy. For a brief characterization of the “schism,” see Louth, *Damascene* (n. 47 above), 163–64.

86 *Chronique de Michel le Syrien patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)*, ed. J. B. Chabot (Paris, 1899–1910), 4:457–61 (Syriac text) and 2:492–96 (French trans.). Significantly, as we saw above, this dogmatic controversy is the one referred to by the Damascene when he alludes to his intimacy with the patriarch of Jerusalem.

81 Eadem, “Palestine à Constantinople” (n. 64 above), 203–4.

82 See, for example, Auzépy, “Palestine à Constantinople,” 225: “Les informations fragmentaires concernant les trois patriarcats orientaux font ressortir que, du fait de la révolution abbaside, leur histoire fut chaotique pendant la seconde moitié du VIII^e siècle, que les schismes furent fréquents et les communautés divisées.”

inhabitants of the countryside used Syriac and the upperclass city-dwellers Greek, this divide also had cultural implications.⁸⁷ Significantly, Michael stresses that the Melkite hierarchy condemned the addition of the δ σταυρωθείς formula “because of the kingdom of the Romans taking it up.” Although no reference to icons is made in this passage, it is reasonable to conclude that the outbreak of the iconoclastic crisis also affected the Melkites. In fact, the chronicle of Michael dates the beginning of the “schism” on the Trisagion to the year 1038, which corresponds to the period from 1 October 726 to 30 September 727. Is it a coincidence that exactly at this time Leo is thought to have started the iconoclastic crisis in Constantinople? Might the new crisis, therefore, have been influenced by the dynamics in Byzantium?

Particularly revealing in this connection is a well-known passage of Michael the Syrian, in which he refers to the Iconoclast Council of 754 summoned by Constantine V and the reasons the emperor had for pronouncing an anathema on John of Damascus:

The Chalcedonians hated this Constantine and called him icon-hater, because he held this synod and forbade the veneration of images. He anathematized Ioannes and George of Damascus⁸⁸ as well as George of Cyprus, because they upheld the teachings of Maximos. The emperor Constantine was a cultivated man and he safely preserved the mysteries of the

orthodox faith. This is why the Chalcedonians hated him.⁸⁹

Michael’s comment is clearly sympathetic to the figure of Constantine V, although, as Sebastian Brock has argued, it does not necessarily mean that the Monophysite or Jacobite Syrians were iconoclasts or even inspired the iconoclasts at Constantinople.⁹⁰ Further, it is evident that Constantine’s hostility to the Chalcedonians—he anathematized some of their most prominent representatives, including John of Damascus—won Michael’s sympathy. Nevertheless, Constantine is said by Michael to have forbidden the veneration of images and, at the same time, to have “safely preserved” the mysteries of orthodoxy; it is inconceivable that Michael could have written these words if he had been a defender of icon worship. We can, therefore, conclude that aniconism was welcome or tolerated by some Monophysite Syrians at the time, although they were hardly Byzantine iconoclasts.

But what about the Melkites? Does Michael suggest that they were icon worshippers? In the passage quoted, it is perhaps the “Chalcedonians” as a whole who hate Constantine V—that is, mainly Greeks of the Byzantine Empire, whose bishops were summoned to the Council of 754. But the ban of the emperor on John of Damascus and two others was not just for being iconodule Chalcedonians, but “because they upheld the teaching of Maximos.” This specification suggests a connection between the Maximites and the defense of icon worship, which might have been absent in other factions of the Melkites, like the Maronites, who were by no means a minority among the Syrian Chalcedonians.⁹¹ John of Damascus is singled out as the representative of one sector of the Melkite church. No patriarch of the Melkite Church is mentioned in the ban, which leads to the conclusion that other representatives of the Chalcedonian Church in the east, whether Maronites or not, did not follow John of Damascus in their theology of the icon. Might this have been the result of the control that “iconoclast”

⁸⁷ For a study of the “schism” between Maximites and Maronites, see S. H. Griffith, “‘Melkites’, ‘Jacobites’ and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in Third/Ninth-Century Syria,” in *Syrian Christians under Islam, the First Thousand Years*, ed. D. Thomas (Leiden, 2001), 9–55, esp. 14–17 and 45–49, as well as 52–53 for a reference to the Jacobite Abū Rā’īta, who draws a sharp distinction between both groups of Melkites. For the iconodule Abū Qurra as follower of Maximos, see below in §7. For the language of the Melkites and its territorial distribution, see J. P. Monferrer Sala, “Between Hellenism and Arabization: On the Formation of an Ethnolinguistic Identity of the Melkite Communities in the Heart of the Muslim Rule,” *Al-Qantara* 33 (2012): 455–73.

⁸⁸ It is not clear who this George of Damascus is (another member of the Manṣūr family?), if there is not a mistake in the text, for two Georges are named. See C. Mango and R. Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284–813* (Oxford, 1997), 592.

⁸⁹ Michael the Syrian (my translation) 4:473 (Syriac text) and 2:521(French trans.) (ed. Chabot).

⁹⁰ S. Brock, “Iconoclasm and the Monophysites,” in Bryer and Herrin, *Iconoclasm* (n. 14 above), 53–57.

⁹¹ Griffith, “Christological Controversies,” 13 n. 19, with reference to several publications by S. P. Brock of Maronite texts of the period.

Constantinople exerted on the Melkite Church? We shall now consider this point.

4. Iconoclast Emperors and the Melkite Patriarchs

Although our knowledge about the influence or popularity of the emperor Leo III among the Melkites amounts to very little,⁹² evidence has been adduced, mostly by Auzépy,⁹³ that the emperor Constantine V meddled in the ecclesiastical affairs of the Melkite churches. This intervention is important, as it might explain some of the divisions among the Melkites.

Auzépy pointed, for instance, to the existence of an encomium to the saints Theodore the General and Theodore the Eastern, written by Theodore, archbishop of Antioch, and preserved in Arabic and Coptic. At some point in the Coptic version of the text, Theodore declares that he was appointed by the emperor Constantine:

Now I call upon you, martyrs of my lord Jesus Christ, that you aid me in my feebleness, because I have taken courage and come into your midst at the will of the godfearing king Constantine and his officers and councillors.⁹⁴

In order to prove Constantine's control of the Melkites, Auzépy also referred to a passage of the chronicle of Ibn al-Makīn, a Coptic writer of the thirteenth century, whose *History*, although based to a great extent on Ṭabarī for the events of the caliphate, contains

⁹² In the Greek text of the *Martyrdom of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, edited by A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, “Muceničestvo sestidesjati novych svjatych mucenikov,” *PPSb* 12, no. 2 (1892): 1–23, the emperor Leo III is referred to as δ τῆς δσίας μνήμης Λέων (§4). This indicates that Leo was already dead at the time, but was still popular among some eastern Christians, for the text seems to have been written by an author who lived in Syria and Palestine. The execution of the sixty martyrs is said to have happened after they were imprisoned on their way to Caesarea about 724–25 and refused to convert to Islam; see G. Huxley, “The Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem,” *GRBS* 18 (1977): 369–74; and S. Efthymiadis, “The Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, vol. 1, (600–900), ed. D. Thomas and B. Roggema, *History of Christian-Muslim Relations* 9 (Leiden and Boston, 2009), 327–29.

⁹³ Auzépy, *L'hagiographie* (n. 71 above), 222.

⁹⁴ E. O. Winstedt, *Coptic Texts on St. Theodore the Eastern, on Chamoul and Justus* (London, 1910), 85.

useful and unparalleled information about the Eastern Christians. According to the Latin translation of the text in the old edition of Thomas van Erp, the emperor Constantine V, after defeating the usurper Artabasdos, “ordered bishop Ishaq to be promoted to the post of patriarch over Antioch and the East because he had frequented him and served him before he reigned.”⁹⁵ In fact, the subject of the sentence in the Arabic text is an anonymous “emir,” who must be identified with the Arab caliph Abū Ja‘far al-Manṣūr (754–775); the latter is expressly said to have deposed a certain patriarch George, who succeeded Athanasios, who had, in turn, reigned only three days after the death of Ishaq. This interpretation is confirmed by the most probable source of this report, contained in the *History of the Patriarchs* by the Coptic historian Mawhūb ibn Manṣūr ibn Mufarrij (1025–1100), where details are given, suppressed by Ibn al-Makīn, for the reasons that lead al-Manṣūr to appoint Ishaq as patriarch, for he had foreseen the birth of his son. Moreover, as the caliph had “commanded that whoever should oppose him should be slain with the sword,” the opposition of the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria to the new patriarch of Antioch and his appointment by the Muslims is described in extenso.⁹⁶

A passage of Theophanes for the year 762/63 is also worth mention in this context. There we read that Kosmas, bishop of Epiphaneia, “on being accused by the citizens of Epiphaneia before Theodore, patriarch of Antioch, concerning the alienation of consecrated objects, and being unable to make them good, renounced the orthodox faith and gave his adherence to Constantine’s heresy directed against the holy icons.” As a reaction, “by common consent, Theodore, patriarch of Antioch, Theodore of Jerusalem, and Kosmas of Alexandria, together with their suffragan bishops, unanimously anathematized him on the day of

⁹⁵ Al-Makīn, *Historia Saracenica, qua res gestae Muslimarum, inde a Muhammedo primo imperii et religionis muslimicae auctore, usque ad initium imperii Atabacei, per XLIX imperatorum successionem fidelissime explicantur, insertis etiam passim Christianorum rebus in Orientis potissimum ecclesiis eodem tempore gestis, arabice olim exarata a Gergio Elmacino fil. Abuljaseri Elamidi f. Abulmacaremi f. Abultibi*, ed. T. Erpenius (Leiden, 1625), 98–99. For al-Makīn, see *EJ* 6:143–44, s.v. al-Makīn.

⁹⁶ *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, part 3, *Agatho to Michael I* (767), ed. B. Everts, *PO* 5.1 (1910): 3–215, here 206–14.

Pentecost after the reading of the holy Gospel, each in his own city.”⁹⁷ This passage is often presented as a proof of the iconodule stance of the Melkite patriarchs. But it can be argued otherwise.

First, the accusation made against Kosmas of Epiphaneia was of alienation of consecrated objects. It is not explicitly stated that he was anathematized on behalf of his iconoclasm. In fact, we know from Theophanes that one of the signatories of the anathema, the patriarch Theodore of Antioch, had been exiled in 756 for several years by the governor of Syria and Egypt, when it was discovered that he had “frequently” (*συχνῶς*) revealed to the emperor Constantine V through letters (sensitive?) information about the Arabs (*τὰ τῶν Ἀράβων*).⁹⁸ If Theodore could act as an agent of Constantine, the emperor’s iconoclasm probably did not matter too much for him.

Second, Epiphaneia, lying on the river Orontes south of Apamea, was undoubtedly a suffragan see of the patriarch of Antioch. It seems that bishop Kosmas, having been accused of theft, changed allegiance to the patriarch of Constantinople. As the emperor was Constantine V, he immediately became an iconoclast in the eyes of Theophanes. But, in reality, this affair might well have been a simple matter of jurisdiction and have provided the emperor an opportunity to interfere in the ecclesiastical matters of the East. The reaction of the patriarchs can be understood from this perspective. Moreover, Theophanes says nothing of a synod or of a synodical letter of the three patriarchs ca. 767 (see below §5), but only refers to this incident. Had he known of a clearer stance of the patriarchs against iconoclasm in this period, he would undoubtedly have mentioned it.

We can therefore conclude that no clear evidence has been preserved that Constantine V effectively intervened in the affairs of the Melkite church or decided

upon the appointment of their prelates. This does not mean, however, that the Melkites remained alien to Constantinople, which was its main supporter against rival churches. Perhaps the control exerted by the caliphs in Baghdad impeded the Melkites from contacting the emperors as regularly as they might have wished (as in the case of Theodore of Antioch), but considering Constantine’s victorious military campaigns in the East, other possibilities might have appeared in the horizon. In fact, after the civil wars following the death of Harūn al-Rashīd in 809, the control exerted by Baghdad in Syria was somehow relaxed. After the victorious campaigns of the emperor Theophilus in eastern Anatolia in the first half of his reign, the three oriental patriarchs sent him a letter hailing him as a victorious emperor and complaining about the tyrannical rule of the Muslims:

For there are three gifts from God, as one of the Fathers has said, kingship, prophecy, priesthood, which are granted to the worthy. For this reason, divinely established and divinely rewarded Sire, we rejoice and take pleasure in the acts of bravery and prowess of your triumphant divinely granted victory. For even if a region under tyrannical sway has separated us, nevertheless the way of divine power has not divided us, but bereft of our ancestral inheritance and subservient to a barbarian enemy, we go about all day, emaciated, mournful and sullen, waiting with divine hope for the former state of our imperial happiness and most tranquil life to be restored once more, and to be allotted the mercies we enjoyed in the past, by command of the One who creates and changes all and transforms the shadow of death into light.⁹⁹

97 Theophanes, *Chronographia* 433–34 (ed. de Boor).

98 Theophanes, *Chronographia* 430: καὶ ἐξώρισθη Θεόδωρος, ὁ πατριάρχης Ἀντιοχείας, φθόνῳ τῶν Ἀράβων διαβληθεὶς, διὰ συχνῶς τῷ βασιλεῖ Κωνσταντίνῳ δηλοποιεῖ τὰ τῶν Ἀράβων διὰ γραμμάτων. καὶ λοιπὸν δὲ αὐτὸς Σαλίμ ὑπερόριον τίθησιν εἰς τὴν Μωαβίτιν χώραν πατρίδα τε αὐτοῦ. καὶ ἐπέτρεψεν δὲ αὐτὸς Σαλίμ μὴ κτίζεθαι νέας ἐκκλησίας, μηδὲ φανῆναι σταυρόν, μηδὲ δογματίσαι περὶ πίστεως Χριστιανὸν μετὰ Ἀράβων. For Theodore, see R.-J. Lilie, ed., *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit: Erste Abteilung (641–867)* (Berlin and New York, 1998–2001), s.v. Theodoros I (von Antiocheia), no. 7573.

99 J. Munitiz, J. Chrysostomides, E. Harvalia-Crook, and Ch. Dendrinos, eds., *The Letter of the Three Patriarchs to the Emperor Theophilus and Related Texts* (Camberley, 1997), §3d (the English translation is by Chrysostomides). See also Signes Codoñer, *Emperor Theophilus* (n. 24 above), chap. 21.

5. A Melkite Synodical Letter against Iconoclasts?

We must consider now some notices preserved in Greek and Latin sources about the existence of Melkite synods condemning iconoclasm in the period between Hieria (754) and Nicaea (787). Some scholars have taken these indications at face value, but their interpretation is more complex.

In 767 Pope Constantine II sent a letter to King Pippin informing him that a *synodica fidei* addressed to his predecessor Pope Paul I by Theodore patriarch of Jerusalem had arrived in Rome during the same year. According to Constantine, this synodical letter of Theodore, which had the approval of the patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria (no names are given) and many other bishops (*in quo et reliqui patriarchae... et plurimi metropolitani episcopi orientalium partium visi sunt concordasse*), proved that the cult of holy images (*fervor sanctarum imaginum*) was widely accepted in all the eastern sees (*orientalibus partibus cunctis christianis inminet*). Constantine handed out to the Frankish king the Greek original, along with a Latin translation (*in Latino et Greco eloquio*).¹⁰⁰

The Greek text has been preserved in the acts of the Council of Nicaea of 787, where it was read out.¹⁰¹ In his letter Theodore of Jerusalem rejects some arguments of the Council of Hieria and defends icon worship. However, in the document copied at Nicaea, Theodore only asks the other patriarchs to endorse and eventually correct (*εἴ τι εὐρεθῇ ἐν αὐτοῖς δεόμενον ἐπιδιορθώσεως*) his synodical letter. Nowhere is it stated that he actually gained their approval.¹⁰² The Jerusalemite author of the letter of credence for the eastern delegates at the council is the only one who maintains that Theodore received, while still living, the approbation of his synodical letter by Kosmas patriarch of Alexandria and Theodore patriarch of Antioch (*τὰ ἀντισυνοδικὰ αὐτῶν*).¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ The original letter is collected in *Codex Carolinus* and was edited with no. 99 in MGH Ep 3, *Epistolae Merowingici et Karolini Aevi*, 1:650–53, see esp. 652.35–653.3 for the passage.

¹⁰¹ Mansi, 12:1135–46 (= Lambertz, *Concilium* [n. 25 above], pars prima, 254.4–268.7).

¹⁰² Mansi, 12:1146B–C (= Lambertz, *Concilium*, pars prima, 268.3–4).

¹⁰³ Mansi 12:1135B (= Lambertz, *Concilium*, pars prima, 254.10–11).

Pope Hadrian also quoted Theodore's synodical letter in a long letter he wrote to Charles the Great ca. 791–94 in order to inform him about the proceedings of Nicaea II.¹⁰⁴ There he mentions *Theodorus patriarcha Ierosolimorum* along with *Cosmas Alexandriae* and *Theodorus alius Antiochie* as the authors of a synodical letter sent to Pope Paul I. In the letter the three patriarchs explained in detail (*subtili narratione*) how the Oriental bishops and believers agreed with the Roman Church in the matter of icon worship (*de sacratissimis imaginibus*) and embraced the cult of the images of saints. Hadrian further informs his readers that the synodical letter was translated into Latin and its creed adopted in the Lateran council summoned by Pope Stephen in 769. He then quotes a passage of the synodical letter containing an anathema against those who do not accept the worship of the image or form of Christ (*imaginem sive figuram domini nostri Iesu Christi*). Later in the letter, Hadrian quotes a second passage of the synodical letter of Theodore.¹⁰⁵ Neither passage has any correspondence with the text of the synodical letter reproduced in the acts of Nicaea.

These testimonia strongly confirm the existence in 767 of a synodical letter under the name of patriarch Theodore of Jerusalem that supports icon worship.¹⁰⁶ It is a different question, however, whether the preserved text of this synodical letter, as used by the popes in 767, 769, and 791–94 and by the patriarch of Constantinople in 787, was genuine and, even most importantly, was endorsed by the whole Melkite church.

On the question of the authenticity of the synodical letter, Auzépy has already remarked that the emphasis on Roman primacy in one of the two passages quoted by the Pope Hadrian is undoubtedly an

¹⁰⁴ MGH Ep 5, *Epistolae Karolini Aevi*, 3:5–57 (letter no. 2).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 11 and 23.

¹⁰⁶ It might be that this is the same text that is mentioned in the *Life of John of Gotha* (AASS June 7:167–71, here 168 [§2]), where it is said that an unnamed patriarch of Jerusalem sent to the saint a collection of "sayings on the holy icons and venerable relics" (*χρήσεις πεπλῶν ἱερῶν εἰκόνων καὶ τιμῶν λειψάνων*), through the mediation of an envoy. As no name of the patriarch is given, no clear inferences are possible. However, the connection of the reference to icons with relics appears relevant to me (see §§7–8 below, for consideration of relics in the period). The passage confirms that the text attributed to Theodore may have assumed the form of an anthology, similar to the one appended to the end of the *Treatises Against the Iconoclasts* of John Damascene. See Lilie, *Prosopographie* (n. 98 above), s.v. Theodoros I (von Jerusalem), no. 7575.

interpolation, forged in the papal chancellery. The anathema against iconoclasts preserved in the other passage can be suspected as well. Since neither passage is mentioned in the acts of Nicaea II, Auzépy suggests that the anathema was added to the original synodical letter by the papal chancellery along with the reference to Roman primacy in order to reinforce the prestige of the papacy before the Carolingians.¹⁰⁷

The question, however, is whether the addition of these two passages was made in 791–94 or already in 767–69. Their absence from the acts of the Nicaea council, held in 787, is not necessarily a confirmation that the interpolation took place after the council, for it is possible that patriarch Tarasios suppressed from the text of the synodical letter all the passages where the Roman primacy was exalted, because they were contrary to the interests of the Constantinopolitan see. Thus, the interpolations might already have taken place in Rome in 767 or, alternatively, in 769.

The existence of two interpolations does not, in itself, affect the iconodule character of the synodical letter, which was pointed out by Pope Constantine in 767 and confirmed by the reading in Nicaea II of other passages in which Theodore of Jerusalem rejected the Council of Hiereia and defended icon worship. Certainly, the two interpolations can be adduced as evidence that there were also other additions and that, accordingly, the original text was thoroughly reworked in its earliest stage in order to produce an uncompromising iconodule document. This is what likely happened with the synodical letter sent by the three Melkite patriarchs to the emperor Theophilus in 836, which, as I mentioned above, was expanded with an iconodule dossier that completely altered its original purpose. However, we can question neither the authenticity nor the existence of the document simply on the basis of parallels or probabilities, especially as we do not have reliable textual evidence. But an examination of historical background will perhaps permit us to understand better the nature and purpose of this iconodule synodical letter of the three Melkite patriarchs.

To begin with, we must inquire about what reasons the Melkites might have had at the time to make a general pronouncement on icon worship. As we have seen, the Islamic occupation does not provide an explanatory context. Further, any statement on

images would have made explicit a latent conflict in the Melkite church—the last thing they needed at the time. Some cogent reason is needed for putting icon worship on the agenda and sending a letter to the pope about it.

A letter of patriarch Kosmas of Alexandria to Pope Paul I is mentioned by the pope himself in a letter he sent to King Pippin ca. 761–67.¹⁰⁸ The letter dates to approximately the time when the synodical letter of Theodore of Jerusalem was also sent to Rome, apparently with the consent of the patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria (Kosmas himself). Now, the letter of Paul I does not say anything about the content of Kosmas's letter, which was carried to him by a monk coming from Africa. We can doubt that it in fact referred to icon worship, for we would have expected, if that were the case, that Pope Constantine would have mentioned it in connection with the letter later addressed by Theodore of Jerusalem to the same Paul, which was apparently subscribed by Kosmas.

It thus appears likely that some kind of correspondence was taking place between Pope Paul and the Melkite patriarchs, which may well have been triggered, as Auzépy suggested,¹⁰⁹ by recent attempts of Constantine V to meddle in the jurisdiction of the eastern patriarchates. If that is the case, the emphasis on the Roman primacy in the letter of Theodore might even have been authentic, rather than an interpolation (as Auzépy argues), for it allowed the Melkite prelates to appeal to Rome against Constantinople.

In such a context, we can admit that the issue of the icons was mentioned. But the discussion of icons may have worked in the same manner as the *filioque* in Photios's time: as a leitmotif that rallied support among partisans and justified actions against other parties in the Church. Some members of the Melkite Church, who perhaps opposed the emperor, may well have addressed the pope and denounced the iconoclastic policy of Constantine V in order to vent some of their grievances. It is, therefore, conceivable that a section of the Melkite Church contacted the pope, though it is, of course, impossible to determine how representative such a group was of the whole Melkite community. Perhaps they were linked with the same

¹⁰⁸ The letter was collected in the *Codex Carolinus* and is edited with no. 40 in MGH Ep 3, *Epistolae Merowingici et Karolini Aevi*, 1:552–53.

¹⁰⁹ Auzépy, "Palestine à Constantinople" (n. 64 above), 226–27.

107 Auzépy, *L'hagiographie* (n. 71 above), 219–20.

circles of Maximites to whom we referred above, who had been anathematized by the emperor Constantine V in 754 and who now looked for legitimacy from the West. If these circles had been occasionally appointing their own patriarchs rather than those aligned with the emperor, this might explain, retrospectively, why Hieria did not mention patriarchs among the supporters of John of Damascus and why Theophanes used ambiguous words to characterize them. These Melkite iconodules might have received some support from the Muslim authorities for their defiance of the emperor, especially given the connections that the family of John of Damascus, the mighty Manṣūrs, had with local potentates.¹¹⁰ They might have occasionally succeeded in presenting themselves as the legitimate representatives of the entire Melkite Church or even usurped the representation of the actual patriarchs of their Church, a not unparalleled event, as we saw in §3.

This reconstruction of events is highly speculative, for we do not have direct evidence about the nature of internal rivalries among the Melkites in these years; even the sequence of the patriarchs is uncertain. However, it may be that the patriarch of Jerusalem took the lead in the approach to the papacy, eventually relying on the support of a significant group of the Palestinian clergy and of the mighty monasteries of the region. Although pilgrimage to the Holy Land from Western countries experienced an upsurge only toward the end of the tenth century,¹¹¹ there were surely close

¹¹⁰ For the family background of John, see Lilie, *Prosopographie* (n. 98 above), s.v. Ioannes Damaskenos (no. 2969). A Stephen Mansūr, relative of John of Damascus, is known to have lived in the eighth century and written some hymns and hagiographies, among which the Martyrdom of Romanos the Younger and the Martyrdom of the Twenty Martyrs of Saint Savas have descended to us. In the first of these two works, which survives only in Georgian, there is very hostile characterization of a gang of iconoclast Greeks who, led by an archon called George, opposed Romanos and his fellow Christians because of their support for icons when all were put in the same prison by the Arabs. Unfortunately, this text informs us only of the iconodulia of the author, but not of a supposed division among Melkites because of icon worship, for both groups in the prison are Byzantine Greeks. It is not said that the Syrians who help Romanos in the prison are Melkites. For a Latin translation of the Martyrdom of Romanos, see P. Peeters, “S. Romain le néomartyr (11 mai 780),” *AB* 30 (1911): 409–27. See also D. H. Vila and M. Nanobashvili, “Stephen Manṣūr,” in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations* (n. 92 above), 387–96.

¹¹¹ See now J. Shepard, “Holy Land, Lost Lands, *Realpolitik*: Imperial Byzantine Thinking about Syria and Palestine in the Later

contacts between Rome and Jerusalem through the presence of numerous Palestinian (“Syrian”) monks in Italy since the end of the seventh century.¹¹² The smaller Melkite community of Alexandria might have eventually lent support to the initiative of the Jerusalem patriarch, but only if we grant that icons were more present in Egypt than elsewhere in the region, because of the deep-rooted iconographic traditions of the Coptic Church (see §10 below). On the other hand, Melkites of the big cities of Syria might not have been so enthusiastic about the defense of the icons made by some of their Palestinian brothers.

But there is still another approach to this question, considering it from the perspective of the Roman see, rather than the Eastern Melkites. From this perspective, it is perhaps revealing that the Melkite legates allegedly tried to engage Rome’s support precisely by referring to icons—that is, they must have known that Rome was sensitive to the problem of icon worship. In fact, the cause of the images was slowly being embraced by the Roman see since the outbreak of iconoclasm in Byzantium in 726. Let us now briefly review the facts.

According to the *Liber Pontificalis*,¹¹³ Pope Gregory III (731–741), on hearing about the persecution of icons (*depositionem et destructionem sacrarum imaginum*) undertaken by the emperors Leo and Constantine, sent the presbyter Gregory to Constantinople with *commonitoria scripta* defending icon worship. Gregory allegedly arrived in Constantinople but was unable to present the case, out of fear of reprisals. Upon his return to Rome, he faced the anger of the pope, who wanted to remove him from the priesthood. He was, however, finally given a penance and sent again to the east. This time he could not reach the imperial capital, for an order of the emperors detained him in Sicily for a whole

10th and 11th Centuries,” *Al-Qantara* 33 (2012): 505–45.

¹¹² M.–F. Auzépy, “Le rôle des émigrés orientaux à Constantinople et dans l’Empire (VII^e–IX^e s.): acquis et perspectives,” *Al-Qantara* 33 (2012): 475–503, contrasts the abundance of notices about the presence of Syrians in Italy with the paucity of information on Melkite emigrants in Byzantium or Constantinople.

¹¹³ L. Duchesne, ed., *Le liber pontificalis*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1955), 415–16. For an analysis of the passage, see P. Speck, *Kaiser Leons III., die Geschichtswerke des Nikephoros und des Theophanes und der Liber Pontificalis: Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung*, part 2, *Eine neue Erkenntnis Kaiser Leons III.*, part 3, *Die Απόστασις Ρώμης κατ Ιταλίας und der Liber Pontificalis*, *Ptoikíla βυζαντινά* 20 (Bonn, 2003), 573–78.

year. At this news, a council was called in Rome, where it was decided that whoever proceeded against the defenders of the ancient use prevailing in the apostolic see (*antiquae consuetudinis apostolicae ecclesiae tenentes fidelem usum*) and pulled down, destroyed, or defiled (*depositor atque destructor et profanator*) the images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin, the Apostles, or the saints, should be excommunicated. The bishops attending the council solemnly (*solemniter*) signed this declaration and added it to the decisions already taken by previous popes (in this same sense?). Again, *alia similiter scripta commonitoria* were sent to Constantinople through the defensor Constantine, but the message was intercepted, and he remained in detention for almost a whole year (*pene per annum integrum*). Then, Constantine was set free and sent back to Rome amid insults. After that, all Italy (*generalitas istius provinciae Italiae*) united in the defense of images and sent, by unanimous consent (*unanimiter*), *supplicationis scripta* to the emperors, but their bearers were again detained in Sicily by the imperial strategos Sergios, now for eight months, before being sent back to Rome amid repeated insults. This chain of failures did not, apparently, discourage the Roman curia, which in a fourth and last attempt sent *adhortatorias litteras* in defense of the images through the defensor Peter. We are not told about the end of this last mission.

No other source informs us about these repeated attempts of the Roman pope to defend images in the face of their alleged persecution by the Byzantine emperors. Does the apparent failure of the four missions to convey the message of the popes to the emperors explain this silence of the oriental sources? How could iconophile Greeks have failed to quote *in extenso* documents of the papal chancery condemning iconoclasm at so early a date? Indeed, doubts have recently been raised about the existence of such a decision against iconoclasm at an early Roman council, considering, among other things, that it is “odd for the acts of a synod held in Italy in the early 730s to pre-empt arguments not elaborated in the eastern sources until the 740s or even later.”¹¹⁴ As Brubaker and Haldon have proven in their recent book, iconoclasm under Leo III was never as extreme as is generally assumed in the

sources.¹¹⁵ It was only under Constantine V that the conflict somehow escalated. Iconoclasm was not, therefore, present in 731,¹¹⁶ so the pope could not have come to the idea of excommunicating iconoclasts (including the emperor and the patriarch) nor could he have sent four successive embassies to Constantinople to handle this question.¹¹⁷ However, as the *Liber Pontificalis* provides us with precise names and a very plausible sequence of embassies (complete with the duration of their detention in Sicily), it is quite probable that the embassies did, indeed, take place, but that they were sent to Constantinople for other reasons.

The only catalyst for such a swift and unanimous (*unanimiter*) consent of the whole of Italy was not icon worship, but the takeover by the Empire of the administration and revenues of the papal patrimonial lands in Sicily and Calabria.¹¹⁸ The recent loss of Africa (699) had deprived the Empire of its most important source of corn, thus making the direct control of Sicily a strategic issue.¹¹⁹ The council probably dealt with these matters, and if icon worship came to the agenda, it could only have been to exert pressure on the Empire.¹²⁰ Moreover, the possibility that the text of the *Liber Pontificalis* has been interpolated, as Speck suggests and Brubaker and Haldon accept,¹²¹ must not be ruled out. Alternatively, the writer of the biography of Gregory

115 They base their conclusions to a great extent on the detailed analysis of the sources of Paul Speck, who wrote abundantly on the topic in many publications, to which Brubaker and Haldon refer constantly in their footnotes.

116 For the alleged attack against iconoclasm in the letters of Pope Gregory II to Leo III, see again Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 91–94. T. F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* (Philadelphia, 2009), 117, considers the letters of Gregory II “so corrupt that they cannot be put in the dock and interrogated.” He further argues that “the relatively few surviving (papal) letters from the period 726 to 750 address various concerns but never raise the issue of images, Byzantine heresy or papal defense of the faith.”

117 The sequence is also illogical: excommunications are to be expected only after negotiations fail, but not before they take place at all.

118 Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 86–87.

119 Ibid., 490–93.

120 For the economic background behind the confrontation of the Papacy with the Empire, see the convincing arguments put forward by F. Marazzi, “Il conflitto fra Leone III Isaurico e il Papato fra il 725 e il 733, e il ‘definitivo’ inizio del Medioevo a Roma: un’ipotesi in discussione,” *PBSR* 59 (1991): 231–57.

121 Speck, *Kaiser Leon III* (n. 113 above), 583–85; and Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 84–85.

114 Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era* (n. 2 above), 84–86 and, for the citation, 84 n. 57.

III may have mistakenly projected into his reign later discussions of icon worship, so as to give more appeal to the bare references at his disposal.¹²²

On the other hand, the *Liber Pontificalis* defends the worship of icons of Christ, the Virgin, the apostles, and the saints in terms very similar to those used by the Lateran council of 769. It is reasonable to suppose that the 769 council dealt with the issue of icon worship for the first time and did not reconfirm the acts, decisions, and canons of the council of 731. The contexts of the two councils were different. No Melkites are mentioned in any source in relation to the council of 731, except for the pope himself, Gregory III, *natione Syrus*, but the situation is different for 769, as we shall see. Moreover, the fabrication of a Latin iconophile florilegium concerning images, based on a previous Greek model,¹²³ appears more probable in 769, when a synodical letter of the Oriental patriarchs was endorsed. It is now time to consider this synod in some detail.

As a matter of fact, there was no special debate on icons in 769. Just one session, the last of the synod, was devoted to the matter.¹²⁴ The real reason for summoning the council was, rather, to legitimate the accession to the papal throne of Stephen III, who was elected in 768, after the deposition and imprisonment of Pope Constantine. The latter had been elected pope scarcely a year earlier in 767, at the death of Paul I, owing to the influence of the Duke of Tuscany, his likely

brother.¹²⁵ But Constantine's election did not please the influential Greek primicerius Christopher, who had been the chief of the chancellery during the papacies of the brothers Stephen II (752–757) and Paul I (757–767);¹²⁶ and so, Christopher caused the Sicilian priest Stephen to be elected as the new pope. Legitimation for this deposition was needed, and it was found in the fact that the blinded Constantine had been elected while a layman (he is nowadays usually considered an antipope). The council in the Lateran with the presence of Frankish bishops sanctioned the election of Stephen III and considered the validity of the decisions taken by Constantine during his short reign.

What was the significance of a statement about icon worship that was passed in a hurry in the last session? Auzépy argues for the central importance of Greek monks from the powerful monastery of Saint Sabas, fierce defenders of icon worship who were the main supporters of Christopher and Stephen III. Constantine was, in fact, imprisoned in their monastery. The defense of icon worship was, thus, a concession to the influential Sabaïtes. They are likely also to be held responsible for the endorsement of the synodical letter of the patriarchs of Jerusalem, for they obviously had close connections with their homonymous mother house in Palestine, whence they ultimately came to Rome ca. 647–53, when the Roman monastery of Saint Sabas was founded.¹²⁷

The opportunity for the Sabaïtes to intervene in the Roman curia perhaps arose as a consequence of the repeated attempts of Emperor Constantine V to engage the Frankish King Pippin in an alliance with Byzantium to the disadvantage of the pope. Byzantine embassies to the Franks followed shortly afterward in the years 757, 760, 763–64, and 766–67. A marriage of Pippin's daughter Gisela to Leo IV was even planned.

122 Noble, *Images* (n. 116 above), 116–24, reviews the literary evidence for the defense of icon worship by the popes ca. 726 to ca. 760 and finds only a few passages in the lives of Popes Gregory II and Gregory III of the *Liber Pontificalis* that deal with this matter (and especially with the 731 council). Strikingly, later popes until Paul I (757–767) seem to wholly ignore the issue of icons. Although Noble does not question the authenticity of the defense of icon worship in 731, he does not fail to notice the problem.

123 In the letter of Pope Hadrian to Charles the Great (mentioned above, n. 104), he refers (p. 15) to *multorum sanctorum patrum testimonia* collected by Gregory II in the council of 731. Grounding his argument on this evidence, Alexakis, *Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115* (n. 77 above), 37–41 and 134–35, dated the pre-existent Greek florilegium to 725–29, before the council of 731. However, and despite an ambiguous reference in *Liber Pontificalis* 477, there is no further source that confirms that such a florilegium was, in fact, prepared by Gregory for the council. The testimony of Hadrian, following Nicaea II, is highly suspect; see, however, Noble, *Images*, 119–23.

124 W. Hartmann, *Die Synoden der Karolingerzeit im Frankenreich und in Italien* (Munich, Vienna, and Zürich, 1989), 84–86. See also Mansi, 12:720–22; and *Liber Pontificalis* 476–77 (ed. Duchesne).

125 For this reconstruction of the events, I follow M.-F. Auzépy, “Les sabaïtes et l'iconoclasme,” in *The Sabaïte Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present*, ed. J. Patrich, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 98 (Louvain, 2001), 305–14, here 308–10 (repr. in Auzépy, *L'histoire* [n. 64 above], 209–20).

126 For the influence of local aristocratic families at the Roma curia, see T. S. Brown, *Gentlemen and Officers: Imperial Administration and Aristocratic Power in Byzantine Italy, A.D. 554–800* (Rome, 1984), 172–74 and 185–87.

127 J.-M. Sansterre, *Les moines grecs et orientaux à Rome aux époques byzantine et carolingienne (milieu du VI^e – fin du IX^e s.)* (Brussels, 1983), 28–29.

However, the papacy succeeded in putting the cause of icon worship on the agenda and in raising objections to the Byzantine innovations of dogma. In the Council of Gentilly of 767, held at the Frankish court, Byzantine “iconoclasm” was rejected. The marriage alliance did not take place, and there were no further contacts between Constantine V and the Franks.¹²⁸ It is, then, most probably in the 760s that the Sabaïtes concocted a dossier of iconophile texts to prove that the Romans adhered more faithfully than the Greeks to the ancient traditions of the Church. The Lateran Council of 769 officially endorsed it and presented it as a decision of the Council of 731. Even if T. F. X. Noble is correct that the issue of the images was dealt with in the Lateran Council of 769 due to Frankish pressure,¹²⁹ this cannot have failed to make the Sabaïtes’ help more instrumental than ever in the pope’s strategy to win the Franks over to his cause.

The influence of the Palestinian Sabaïtes over the papal curia extended over the entirety of the eighth century and affected even the artistic orientation of the papacy toward Greek models. It had already begun in the seventh century, when the Sabaïtes came to Rome, but increased continuously during the eighth.¹³⁰ It culminated in the ninth century, when Pope Paschal I developed a whole iconographic program.¹³¹

Moreover, the Sabaïtes, with a richly endowed library, also had a theological background, which was much needed by the papacy. Many texts produced at the time in the papal curia were probably written under their influence, beginning with a Greek iconophile

florilegium and ending with the letter of Paschal I to the iconoclast Emperor Leo, in which the pontiff presents arguments in support of images.¹³² The Sabaïtes also contributed to the knowledge of some iconophile works hitherto unknown in Constantinople, especially of John of Damascus, whose florilegia appended to his three treatises on the icons show a close relation to the Sabaïte iconophile florilegium, making the assumption of a common source inevitable. Alexakis even asks whether one should “connect the arrival of the Damascene works in Rome with the sending of the *Synodica rectae fidei* of the three Oriental patriarchs,” as this synodical letter also included an iconophile florilegium.¹³³

More importantly, the Sabaïtes are responsible for the composition of the iconodule florilegium of the *Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115*. This florilegium was the main and almost the only source for the iconophile dossier used in the Council of Nicaea in 787. It was no accident that the papal ambassador to Byzantium in 786, on the eve of the council, was the abbot of the monastery of St. Sabas.¹³⁴ As we have seen, probably one Sabaïte composed ca. 770 the *Adversus iconoclastas*, a furious iconophile pamphlet written with the intention of endowing the whole florilegium with an introductory piece that could serve to refute the *Horos* of the Hiereia council of 754.¹³⁵ Other notorious works of the period that aimed at refuting iconoclasm—like the *Nouθεστα γέροντος περὶ τῶν ἀγλῶν εἰκόνων*, the Greek letters of Gregory II to Leo III, or the *Adversus Constantinum Caballinum* (see §3 above)—probably originated in Sabaïte circles as well.¹³⁶ Lastly, the expanded iconodule version of the letter of the three Melkite patriarchs to the emperor Theophilos ca. 836

128 I follow here the reconstruction of the events made by M. McCormick, “Textes, images et iconoclasme dans le cadre des relations entre Byzance et l’Occident carolingien,” in *Testo e immagine nell’Alto Medioevo: XLI Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo*, 15–21 aprile 1993, vol. 1 (Spoleto, 1994), 95–158, esp. 113–31; and Noble, *Images* (n. 116 above), 140–45.

129 According to Noble, *Images*, 145–49, the Franks must have considered the synod of Gentilly to be “too small and local” to settle the matter of icon worship, which, “after all, had driven a wedge between the Frankish and Byzantine courts.”

130 For the influence of the Greek monks on the papacy, see esp. Sansterre, *Moines grecs*.

131 E. Thunø, *Image and Relic: Mediating the Sacred in Early Medieval Rome* (Rome, 2002), has recently studied the objects commissioned by Paschal I and deposited in the Sancta Sanctorum of the Lateran basilica until the beginning of the twentieth century: an enamel reliquary gold cross and two silver caskets, all sumptuously decorated with extensive Christological narratives.

132 Thunø, *Image and Relic*, 131–56.

133 Alexakis, *Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115* (n. 77 above), 134–37.

134 Mansi, 12:989–90 and 994A (= Lambertz, *Concilium* [n. 25 above], pars prima, 12.12–13 and 18.10–14).

135 Alexakis, *Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115*, 98–99, esp. n. 23, and Auzépy, “Sabaïtes” (n. 125 above), 309.

136 Alexakis, *Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115*, 110–23. The *Nouθεστα γέροντος* is perhaps the most problematic piece of the whole complex, for the concluding paragraph of the work expressly states that it was composed in Syria. If that is true, it would confirm the continuing connections between the Roman Sabaïtes and some Palestinian Melkite monasteries, but it is, again, not to be advanced as proof of an overwhelming Melkite support for icon worship. For a discussion of some of these texts, see also Speck, *Ich bin’s nicht* (n. 13 above).

is likely to be connected with Melkite circles working in Constantinople after the restoration of the icons in 843.¹³⁷

All these texts prove that the Greek Sabaïtes in Rome were not only radical supporters of icon worship but produced with the support of the Roman papacy a vast literature against iconoclasts, which included florilegia, pamphlets, and papal letters. Further, it is crucial that some of these texts, like the famous *Constitutum Constantini*,¹³⁸ were reputed to be forgeries or interpolated versions of previous works.¹³⁹ We see a systematic rewriting of the history of iconoclasm through the agency of a group of Greek monks in Rome who appeared as the authoritative source for the eastern patriarchates. Any information provided by these circles about the support of the Melkites for icon worship is to be approached with the utmost care. The text of the synodical letter of 767 is no exception.

It is worth adducing here an interesting parallel that is relevant to our argument. Rudolf Riedinger has established that, contrary to expectation and to *communis opinio*, the Greek version of the acts of the Council of Lateran of 649, which was controlled by the followers of Maximos the Confessor, is the original and the Latin a translation. This conclusion initially appears odd, as the council was held in Rome, and Latin was obviously the language used in the sessions. But the influence of the learned Greek Maximites over the less intellectually accomplished Latin curia was apparently so great that they were able to produce, first, a Greek draft of the decisions they wanted to be endorsed by the Roman council, then a Latin translation to be given to the assembly of western bishops. This Latin version, prepared, as Riedinger proves, by the Byzantines themselves, was read aloud in five

consecutive sessions held in October 649 and finally approved by the synod, thus making a council statement out of the opinions that Maximos had previously defended privately.¹⁴⁰ This is irrefutable evidence of the free hand that the Greek Maximites had in directing (and, accordingly, in manipulating) the decisions of the Roman popes at the time. Why should we suppose that it was any different a century later with the iconodule Sabaïtes?

In the interest of balance, we can take for granted the existence of a party of defenders of icon worship in the Melkite Church, who managed through the agency of the Sabaïte emigrants to be influential in the papal curia (as were the followers of Maximos a century earlier). They helped the pope to present himself as the true champion of the tradition of the Church against Byzantine iconoclasm, thus putting an end to the impending alliance between the two empires. However, it is by no means assured that the whole Melkite Church followed their views about icon worship. These views might even have developed in the context of the struggle to win the Frankish kingdom over to the cause of Rome and have acquired some grounding only in Palestine (in the monasteries?) and the Jerusalem patriarchate since the 760s, but not necessarily earlier or in other areas of Syria. To prove this point, we shall now turn our attention to the existing evidence for support of icon worship coming from the Antiochene patriarchate.

6. The Iconodule Synod of Antioch in Theodore of Stoudios

In a letter to John the Grammarian (probably the later iconoclast patriarch),¹⁴¹ written ca. 821–26,¹⁴² Theodore of Stoudios copies a defense of icon worship from a synod held in Antioch under the patriarch Theodoret ($\tauῆς ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ συνόδου ἐπὶ Θεοδωρήτου πατριάρχου$). The same passage is repeated in the

137 Signes Codoñer, *Emperor Theophilos* (n. 24 above), chap. 21.

138 For this text, the most famous of the falsifications of the Middle Ages, see the recent study of J. Fried, *Donation of Constantine and Constitutum Constantini: The Misinterpretation of a Fiction and its Original Meaning*, Millennium Studien 3 (Berlin and New York, 2006), who convincingly connects the forgery not with the papacy, as usually assumed, but with the monastery of St. Denis and the figure of Hilduin. He concludes that the text of the *Donatio* was written ca. 830–33 following an extensive exchange between the monasteries of Corbie and St. Denis. If this interpretation is confirmed, it would have far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the period.

139 Auzépy, "Sabaïtes," 309–10.

140 Details in R. Riedinger, *Der Codex Vindobonensis 418, seine Vorlage und seine Schreiber*, Instrumenta Patristica 17 (Steenbrugge, 1989), 9–23. A summary of these conclusions is in idem, *Concilium universale Constantinopolitanum tertium: Concilii actiones XII–XVIII, Epistulae, Indices*, ACO, 2nd ser., 2.2:VII–X.

141 Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 376.

142 G. Fatouros, ed., *Theodori Studitiae epistulae*, CFHB 30 (Berlin, 1992), no. 528, ll. 75–93.

letter that Theodore wrote to the emperors Michael and Theophilos in 826.¹⁴³

Auzépy, basing her argument on the *Ecclesiastical Chronicle* of Bar Hebraeus, where “the patriarch of the Greeks” named Theodoret is said to have been exiled for nine years between 764 and 775, concluded that this Theodoret summoned a council about the images before 764.¹⁴⁴ Accordingly, the council probably met before the composition of the synodical letter by Theodore of Jerusalem in 767, the authenticity of which we discussed above. This raises problems: the evidence that we have so far gathered suggests that in 767 Theodore of Jerusalem requested from a patriarch of Antioch, also named Theodore, endorsement of his iconodule synodical letter, while a certain Theodoret, also known to have been patriarch of Antioch, was in prison in Baghdad, after summoning a synod on the icons before 764. Considering the similarity of names, it is tempting to suggest a confusion between them in the sources—namely, that Bar Hebraeus substituted the patriarch Theodoret for Theodore. In fact, Theodoret is usually considered to have ruled as patriarch of Antioch ca. 785–99, after the reign of Theodore (757–ca. 785).¹⁴⁵

On this argument, the Melkite patriarch Theodoret mentioned by Theodore of Stoudios held a synod on the images between 785 and 799—that is, shortly before or sometime after the synod of Nicaea II in 787. This scenario, however, fails to convince, for if the synod had met before, it would have been mentioned at Nicaea II; yet the representatives of the eastern patriarchs, of dubious legitimacy,¹⁴⁶ are absolutely silent on the point. If, on the other hand, Theodoret summoned a synod after Nicaea II, it could only have had the purpose of endorsing the decision previ-

ously passed by the Constantinopolitan council. We can, therefore, surmise that patriarch Theodoret was impeded from attending Nicaea II in 787 or even from sending representatives to it, so that he felt obliged to remedy this deficiency some time later in order to ingratiate himself with the new iconodule authorities in Byzantium. But this is, of course, pure conjecture.

Unfortunately, we have no further information about this iconophile synod held in Antioch. Neither dating nor circumstance is known. Theodore of Stoudios’ use of evidence from the synod in a letter to the last iconoclast emperors proves only that he considered the text authentic. However, as I have shown elsewhere,¹⁴⁷ Theodore did not succeed in getting in touch with the Melkite prelates, so he probably did not obtain information about the synod from them. From where, then, did he get this evidence? Might the Palestinian Sabaite refugees in the monastery of Chora in Constantinople,¹⁴⁸ even the same Michael the Syncellos and the brothers Graptoi who are the main characters of the *Life of Michael the Syncellos*, be responsible for conveying some report of the Antiochian synod to Theodore? They were, after all, contemporaries and sided together against the iconoclasts. Still, we do not have any evidence supporting this conjecture. On the contrary, when Michael the Syncellos travelled to Constantinople, surely before 815, the second iconoclast crisis had not yet started.¹⁴⁹

Perhaps a closer look at the two letters in which Theodore mentions the Antiochian synod may prove fruitful. The information Theodore provides about the council in both letters consists of the same three passages, which are copied one after the other without any further context. It is immediately clear that they are extracts from a longer text, for the first passage lacks a main verb and has three nominative pendent participles; the second passage begins with an adversative

¹⁴³ Ibid., no. 532, ll. 229–46, where the text is presented as φωνὴ τῶν ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ συνεδρευσάντων πατέρων.

¹⁴⁴ J. B. Abbeloos and T. J. Lamy, eds., *Gregorii Barhebraei chronicon ecclesiasticum*, 3 vols. (Paris and Louvain, 1872–77), 3:160–64.

¹⁴⁵ See J. Nasrallah, “Regard critique sur I. Dick, T. Abū Qurra, De l’existence du Créateur et de la vraie religion,” *ProC* 36 (1986): 46–62, esp. 59–60, and 37 (1987): 63–70; and idem, *Histoire du mouvement littéraire dans l’église melchite du V^e au XX^e siècle: Contribution à l’étude de la littérature arabe chrétienne*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 750–Xe siècle (Louvain and Paris, 1987), 16 and 112. See also §7 below, for the patriarch Theodoret of Antioch in connection with the biography of Theodore Abū Qurra.

¹⁴⁶ See n. 71 above.

¹⁴⁷ J. Signes Codoñer, “Theodore Studite and the Melkite Patriarchs on Icon Worship,” in *L’aniconisme dans l’art religieux byzantin*, ed. P. Magdalino and J. L. Rey (Geneva, 2013), in press.

¹⁴⁸ Auzépy, “Sabaïtes,” 311–14.

¹⁴⁹ In fact, the dogmatic letter for the Armenians written by Abū Qurra on behalf of Thomas the patriarch of Jerusalem and translated into Greek by Michael the Syncellus himself does not make any mention of the icons (PG 97:1504–27). See also Cl. Sode, *Jerusalem—Konstantinopel—Rom: Die Viten des Michael Syncellos und der Brüder Theodoros und Theophanes Graptoi*, Altertumswissenschaftliches Kolloquium 4 (Stuttgart, 2001), 286–87 and n. 13.

conjunction ($\alpha\lambda\alpha$); and the third with an illative ($\omega\nu\kappa\omega\nu$). Moreover, the second and third passages are introduced by the same phrases in both letters: $\kappa\alpha\iota\mu\epsilon\theta'$ $\dot{\epsilon}\tau\epsilon\rho\alpha$ ("and after some other things") in the second and $\kappa\alpha\iota\mu\epsilon\tau'$ $\delta\acute{\alpha}i\gamma\alpha$ ("and after a few things") in the third.¹⁵⁰

It certainly could be that Theodore twice extracted exactly the same passages from a text at his disposal and that he introduced the passages in the same way. But it could also be that he did not know anything more about this council except for these three quotations. Otherwise, one would have expected more specific details about the council (dating, occasion, etc.), either in these two letters (and especially in the one addressed to the emperors) or in any other written by Theodore. This silence is even more suspect as Theodoret was, in fact, the Melkite patriarch of Antioch when the council of Nicaea II was summoned, a council about which Theodore of Stoudios felt uncomfortable, to say the least.¹⁵¹

The way the Antioch synod is referred to in both letters provides further evidence of the fragmentary character of the information available to Theodore. In the letter addressed to the emperors (no. 532), Theodore, after a prologue in which he justifies his address to Michael and Theophilos (ll. 5–31), refers to the definition of the Trinity and the nature of Christ, as established by the seven ecumenical councils, including Nicaea II (ll. 32–48). This last synod, according to Theodore, based its defense of icon worship in four kinds of argument, which he develops in the rest of the letter (ll. 48–50): the natural creed (*ἐκ τε φυσικοῦ δόγματος*), that is to say, the natural explanations for admitting icon worship, based on the testimony of the Bible (ll. 48–114); the sayings of the Fathers (*παρά τε πατρικῶν χρήσεων*) (ll. 115–201); the decisions of the councils (*ἐκ τε συνοδικῶν ἐκφωνήσεων*) (ll. 202–50); and the “ancient decrees” (*παρὰ ἀρχαῖαις θεσμοθεσίαις*), meaning, in fact, the apostolic tradition of the Church (ll. 251–70). It is the third section that interests us here. Theodore quotes only two councils, the Quinisextum of 692, specifically the famous canon 82 (ll. 201–28), and the Antioch synod (ll. 228–50). The Quinisextum is referred to as the “decision

of the Fathers who assembled in Constantinople after the sixth [council]” (*φωνὴ τῶν μετὰ τὴν ἔκτην συνεδρευσάντων πατέρων ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει*, ll. 202–4), thus providing, at least, its sequence order. The Antiochian synod is, in turn, simply introduced as “a decision of the Fathers who assembled in Antioch” (*φωνὴ τῶν ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ συνεδρευσάντων πατέρων*, ll. 228–29), without any chronological indication. After this, the three extracts and a final comment of Theodore of Stoudios follow (ll. 246–50). This simple exposition surprises the reader, in the utter absence of any other source for this council.

In the letter to John the Grammarian (no. 528), written probably in the same year as the letter to the emperors (826), Theodore first sends a copy of the letter he had written to Athanasios (no. 428), where his position about icon worship was expounded. But Theodore then introduces further passages that reinforce his defense of the icons: a quotation of John Chrysostom (ll. 69–74), the three extracts from the Antioch synod (ll. 75–93), and a short quotation from Nicaea II (ll. 94–96). The compilation of these passages into a little anthology is revealed by the fact that the second extract from the Antiochian synod refers, as an authority, to the passage of Chrysostom that is quoted *in extenso* in the first place. Specifically, the passage is taken from *In natale sancti Ioannis prophetae*, a work currently considered spurious.¹⁵² We cannot be sure what came first, the quotation of Chrysostom or the extracts from the Antiochian synod referring to it—although the second option seems more likely, since only one of the three extracts from the Antiochian synod referred to Chrysostom. In any case, the interconnection between all these passages seems evident and is typical of florilegia. The short quotation from Nicaea II at the end also seems strange for Theodore of Stoudios, who could have copied extensively from this council had he access to a copy of its acts. I suspect, therefore, that these quotations just happened to come into the hands of Theodore as part of an iconodule anthology. He probably used them first in his letter for John and then for a second letter to Michael and Theophilos, where he naturally suppressed the other two quotations (of Chrysostom and of Nicaea II) that made clear the anthologic nature of his source.

150 Theodore of Stoudios, *Letters* no. 528, ll. 80–81 and 90–91 = no. 532, ll. 234 and 244 (ed. Fatouros).

¹⁵¹ See P. Henry, "Initial Eastern Assessments of the Seventh Ecumenical Council," *JTS* 25 (1974): 75–92, and Signes Codoñer, "Melkitischen Patriarchen" (n. 72 above).

152 PG 61:757-62.

The Roman Sabaïtes are, once again, a likely source of this little anthology, for, as we saw above, they had extracted texts and prepared florilegia for Nicaea II, like the one transmitted by Parisinus Graecus 1115.¹⁵³ The likelihood that Theodoret was the Melkite patriarch of Antioch at the time of Nicaea II makes it even more likely that the anthology, which included three extracts from the Antioch synod, was prepared in connection with the ecumenical council.

The wording of these three extracts permits no further conclusion, although the terms *χαρακτήρ* (as immaterial image) and *εικών* (the material icon) are used with consistency and in a very technical way, which can be explained only if we suppose a deep reflection on the topic in the text that originally included the extracts. It seems, therefore, unwarranted to conclude that the text was a forgery, although it was not, perhaps, originally approved in a synod.

7. Theodore Abū Qurra

The second half of the eighth century witnesses the increasing importance of the Arabic language for the Melkites, culminating in the work of Theodore Abū Qurra, one of the most famous Melkite theologians of the period.¹⁵⁴ He is author of an important corpus of works, written mostly in Arabic (with more than forty short Greek texts).¹⁵⁵ Most important for us here is his Arabic treatise *On the Veneration of the Holy Icons*,

¹⁵³ See Alexakis, *Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115* (n. 77 above), and Auzépy, "Sabaïtes" (n. 125 above), 309–10.

¹⁵⁴ For Abū Qurra in general, see S. H. Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah: The Intellectual Profile of an Arab Christian Writer of the First Abbasid Century* (Tel Aviv, 1992); S. K. Samir, *Abū Qurrah: Vida, bibliografía y obras*, Studia Semitica, Series Minor 1 (Córdoba, 2005); J. C. Lamoreaux, "The Biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah Revisited," *DOP* 56 (2002): 25–40; and idem, "Theodore Abū Qurra," in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations* (n. 92 above), 439–91.

¹⁵⁵ R. Glei and A. T. Khoury, eds., *Johannes Damaskenos und Theodor Abū Qurra: Schriften zum Islam*, Corpus Islamo-Christianum, Series Graeca 3 (Würzburg, 1995), present seventeen Greek works on Islam usually attributed to Theodore, including, for the first time, a prologue by his disciple John the Deacon, who apparently composed the texts in Greek based on Theodore's disputes with Muslims. J. C. Lamoreaux, "Theodore Abū Qurrah and John the Deacon," *GRBS* 42 (2001): 361–86, argues that only the first nine texts of this collection are actually based on Theodore's works; he suspects (along with S. H. Griffith, "The Monks of Palestine and the Growth of Christian Literature in Arabic," *The Muslim World*

where he develops the arguments put forward by the Damascene and adds new ones to the debate.¹⁵⁶ But before commenting upon the text, we shall briefly review his biography.

Abū Qurra's life stretched from 755¹⁵⁷ to 830. He passed most of it in the Middle East as the Melkite bishop of the Syrian city of Harrān, for which he was known in the sources.¹⁵⁸ He seems also to have had close connections with Palestine and Jerusalem, where he probably made a pilgrimage.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, Abū Qurra is also known to have written a letter to the Armenians on behalf of the patriarch of Jerusalem.¹⁶⁰ On the other hand, any membership, however temporary, of Abū Qurra in the Palestinian monastery of Mar Sabas must be rejected.¹⁶¹ Chronological reasons also prevent him from ever having been a disciple of John of Damascus, whose connection with the same monastery has also been recently questioned.¹⁶² Finally, contrary to frequent conjecture, Abū Qurra never traveled to Baghdad.¹⁶³

The many gaps in the evidence about Abū Qurra's life make any account uncertain, but no preserved testimony links him with any public discussion or

⁷⁸ [1988]: 1–28, esp. 22–23) that most of the Greek works appearing under Theodore's name were not originally written by him.

¹⁵⁶ For an English translation of the text, see S. H. Griffith, *A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons by Theodore Abū Qurrah, Bishop of Harrān* (c. 755 – c. 830 A.D.), Eastern Christian Texts in Translation 1 (Louvain, 1997).

¹⁵⁷ Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 18; idem, "Reflections on the Biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah," in *Actes du 4^e congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes* (Cambridge, Septembre 1992), ed. S. K. Samir, *Parole de l'Orient* 18, no. 1 (1993): 143–70, here 149; and idem, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 11–12. Nasrallah, *Histoire* (n. 145 above), 109–10, argued for 725 as the birth date of Abū Qurra in order to make him a student of the Damascene.

¹⁵⁸ Lamoreaux, "Biography of Theodore," 36–39.

¹⁵⁹ Griffith, "Reflections," 152–53.

¹⁶⁰ PG 97:1504–22. See, especially, J. C. Lamoreaux, "An Unedited Tract against the Armenians by Theodore Abū Qurrah," *Le Muséon* 105 (1992): 327–41; also Griffith, "Reflections," 147; idem, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 9–10; Sode, *Jerusalem—Konstantinopel—Rom* (n. 149 above), 286–87; and Lamoreaux, "Biography of Theodore," 35.

¹⁶¹ Lamoreaux, "Biography of Theodore," proved beyond any doubt that there is no basis for assuming that Abū Qurra had ever been monk at the Mar Sabas monastery. See also Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 19–20; idem, "Reflections," 150–52; and idem, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 12–15.

¹⁶² Auzépy, "Palestine à Constantinople" (n. 64 above), 191–92.

¹⁶³ Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 27–29; and idem, "Reflections," 161–62, arguing against Nasrallah, *Histoire*, 110.

polemic on icon worship. This is in contrast with John of Damascus, anathematized in the Hiereia council for his defense of images. For this reason, it is important to consider now in more detail three circumstances of Abū Qurra's biography that might eventually shed some light on his attitude to icon worship.

The first is the removal of Abū Qurra from his episcopal see at Harrān by Theodoret, the Melkite patriarch of Antioch, as reported by Michael the Syrian, in connection with the later travels of Abū Qurra to Alexandria and Armenia.¹⁶⁴ Michael states that Abū Qurra "had been for a short time bishop of Harrān and had been deposed by their patriarch Theodoret because of charges brought against him." If patriarch Theodoret was, indeed, in charge between 785 and 799, as it is generally agreed,¹⁶⁵ the removal of Abū Qurra would have taken place in the last years of the eighth century. Michael does not substantiate the nature of the charges against the bishop, which prompted Sidney Griffith to conjecture that Abū Qurra was removed for his stubborn and open defense of icon worship.¹⁶⁶ There is, however, no explicit testimony in the sources in support of this hypothesis. In fact, this same Theodoret is held responsible for summoning a council in defense of the images, as we have seen above in §6.¹⁶⁷

Nevertheless, in the passage of Michael the Syrian quoted above Theodoret is charged with propagating the doctrine of Maximos the Confessor among the countries he visited. As we saw above in §3, John of Damascus is also connected with the Maximites. Thus, the shared arguments used by John and Abū Qurra in defense of the icons might be explained as a result of their common adherence to the same theological movement, rather than as a consequence of a personal

¹⁶⁴ Michael the Syrian 4:495 (Syriac text) and 3:32 (French trans.) (ed. Chabot). See Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*; 15–16, idem, "Reflections," 145–47; and idem, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 7–9, for an interpretation of the passage.

¹⁶⁵ See Nasrallah, "Regard critique" (n. 145 above), 59–60 (in n. 55 he refers to his *Chronologie des patriarches d'Antiochie de 750 à 1250*, a work in press but never published); and idem, *Histoire*, 16 and 112. According to Auzépy, *L'hagiographie* (n. 71 above) 222–23, Theodoret was patriarch before 764, as he was in jail in Bagdad during nine years after this date.

¹⁶⁶ Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 32–33; idem, "Reflections," 164–67; and idem, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 19–20.

¹⁶⁷ See §6 above for a possible reference to this Theodoret by Theodore the Studite.

relationship between them. But this is clearly not ground enough to support further conjectures.

The second element in the life of Abū Qurra that might be informative on his iconodule stance is his connection with a famous Melkite iconodule, Michael the Synkellos. As noted above, Theodore Abū Qurra composed a Christological treatise, addressed to the "heretical" church of Armenia, on behalf of Thomas, the patriarch of Jerusalem. The title of the work not only indicates that the text was composed in Arabic by Theodore himself on behalf of the patriarch, but further specifies that it was "translated by the presbyter Michael, synkellos of the apostolic throne, with which it was also delivered [i.e., to the Armenians]".¹⁶⁸ As Thomas was apparently appointed patriarch in 807, the treatise would have been composed after this date. The terminus ante quem is provided by Michael's departure for Constantinople (where he seems to have been sent by Thomas in an embassy to the emperor), for he never returned to the caliphate. The embassy has been variously dated to 814, at the beginning of the reign of Leo V, or to the reign of Michael I (811–813).¹⁶⁹

There is another possible connection between Abū Qurra and Michael Synkellos, for we know that Michael composed his famous treatise on Greek syntax in Edessa, at the request of a deacon Lazaros, labeled "philosopher and logothete" in the title of the work.¹⁷⁰ Michael could certainly have stopped at Edessa on his way to Armenia bearing the text sent by the patriarch of Jerusalem, but we need not suppose that the trip that Abū Qurra himself made to Armenia some time after 813 (according to Michael the Syrian)¹⁷¹ was part of the same mission of Michael the Synkellos.¹⁷² If Abū Qurra

¹⁶⁸ PG 97:1504D: διὰ δὲ Μιχαὴλ πρεσβυτέρου, καὶ συγκέλλον ἀποστολικοῦ θρόνου μεταφρασθείσα, μεθ' οὐ καὶ ἀπέσταλται. For an Arabic text of Abū Qurra against the Armenians, perhaps related to the preserved Greek version, see Lamoreaux, "Unedited Tract" (n. 160 above).

¹⁶⁹ See Sode, *Jerusalem—Konstantinopel—Rom*, 209–12 and 285–87, for a discussion of the problems related to the dating of Michael's embassy and his stay in Edessa.

¹⁷⁰ D. Donnet, *Le traité de la construction de la phrase de Michel le Syncelle de Jérusalem: Histoire du texte, édition, traduction et commentaire* (Brussels and Rome, 1982), 3–4.

¹⁷¹ Michael the Syrian 4:495–698 (Syriac text) and 3:32–34 (French trans.) (ed. Chabot).

¹⁷² Pace Griffith, "Reflections," 146–47, and idem, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 7–10.

went with Michael to Armenia, the Synkellos would not have been named as the only messenger of the text of the patriarch. On the other hand, several stays of Abū Qurra in Jerusalem or of Michael the Synkellos in Edessa are perfectly conceivable. Regular contact between these men explains the composition of a theological text by Abū Qurra for the Jerusalem patriarch and of a Greek syntax by Michael the Synkellos for the Edessans. This is significant, inasmuch as Michael the Synkellos, upon his arrival in Constantinople, revealed himself to be an impassioned defender of the icons. If he and Abū Qurra were united in their defense of icons, it might be that the departure of Michael the Synkellos, as well as the famous iconodule brothers Theodore and Theophanes *Graptoi*, for Constantinople, was related to the internal troubles of the Melkite church in Palestine.¹⁷³ Auzépy even suggested that the reason for the travel of these three famous Palestinian iconodules was a confrontation with the patriarch of Jerusalem.¹⁷⁴

A third fact of Abū Qurra's biography bears on his supposed iconodulia. I refer now to his open discussion with the caliph Ma'mūn on the latter's visit to the city of Harrān in 829.¹⁷⁵ A Syrian chronicle reports that the debate was about the faith of the Christians

173 For Michael and the Graptoi, see Sode, *Jerusalem—Konstantinopel—Rom*.

174 Auzépy, "Palestine à Constantinople" (n. 64 above), 209–13.

175 For the text, see G. Graf, *Die arabischen Schriften des Theodor Abū Qurra, Bischofs von Harrān (ca. 740–820)*, Literarhistorische Untersuchungen und Übersetzung (Paderborn, 1910), 77–85; A. Guillaume, "A Debate between Christian and Muslim Doctors," *JRAS Centenary Supplement* (1924): 233–44; idem, "Theodore Abu Qurra as Apologist," *The Muslim World* 15 (1925): 42–51; I. Dick, "La discussion d'Abū Qurra avec les ulémas musulmans devant le calife al-Ma'mūn," *Parole de l'Orient* 16 (1990–91): 107–13, esp. 112–13; Griffith, "Reflections," 156–58; idem, "The Qur'an in Arab Christian Texts: The Development of an Apologetical Argument: Abū Qurrah in the Maglis of al-Ma'mūn," *Parole de l'Orient* 24 (1999): 203–33, esp. 223–32; idem, "The Monk in the Emir's Majlis: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period," in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, ed. H. Lazarus-Yafeh, M. R. Cohen, S. Somekh, and idem, *Studies in Arabic Language and Literature* 4 (Wiesbaden, 1999), 13–65, esp. 38–48; D. Bertaina, *Christian and Muslim Dialogues: The Religious Uses of a Literary Form in the Early Islamic Middle East* (Piscataway, 2011), 212–28; and idem, "The Debate of Theodore Abū Qurra," in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations* (n. 92 above), 556–64, esp. 557. See also W. Nasry's Introduction to his *The Caliph and the Bishop: A 9th Century Muslim-Christian Debate, Al-Ma'mūn and Abū Qurrah*, Textes et études sur l'Orient Chrétien 5 (Beirut, 2008).

and "is written in a special book for anyone who wants to read it."¹⁷⁶ The work has been preserved and was recently edited by Ignace Dick¹⁷⁷ and David Bertaina,¹⁷⁸ but both editions are out of reach for most scholars, as the first is a private publication printed in Aleppo and the second an unpublished dissertation. Fortunately, I have been able to consult the English translation of the text by Wafik Nasry,¹⁷⁹ who made it after collating eleven manuscripts, the oldest of which dates to the fifteenth century.

In the dialogue between the caliph and the bishop of Harrān, there is absolutely no discussion about icons or images. The Arabic word for "image" (صورة; *sūra*), usually applied also to icons, appears just twice: the first time for man as "image" of God, the second for Christ as "image" of the Father.¹⁸⁰ The cross, however, figures prominently in the discussion between the Muslim theologians, who accuse the Christians of either worshipping or exalting the cross. In his defense, Theodore refers to the Black Stone at Mecca and argues that Christian kings put the cross on their banners because it brings victory and triumph—an argument very close to iconoclast propaganda, although evidently not exclusive to iconoclastic emperors.¹⁸¹

This work was certainly not originally written by Abū Qurra, but represents rather a distorted reflection of a historical debate that took place in Harrān in 829. Perhaps students of Abū Qurra or members of his circle reported the dialogue, which was later interpolated, expanded, or altered.¹⁸² Despite these distortions, however, the text of the dialogue can yet represent Theodore's original views. Some confirmation of the absence of icon worship from the agenda of Theodore's

176 *Chronicle of 1234* (n. 21 above), 22–23; French translation by A. Abouna and J. M. Fiey in *Anonymi Auctoris Chronicon ad A.C. 1234 pertinens*, CSCO 354 = *Scriptores Syri* 154 (Louvain, 1974), 16.

177 I. Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra avec les ulémas musulmans devant le calife al-Ma'mūn, étude et édition critique* (= *Mujādalat Abī Qurrah ma'a al-mutakallimīn al-muslimīn fi majlis al-khalifah al-Ma'mūn*) (Aleppo, 1999).

178 D. Bertaina, "An Arabic Account of Theodore Abū Qurra in Debate at the Court of Caliph al-Ma'mūn: A Study in Early Christian and Muslim Literary Dialogue" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 2007).

179 Nasry, *Caliph and Bishop*.

180 Ibid., §21 and §446.

181 Ibid., §§371–80.

182 For a *status quaestionis*, see ibid., 85–123.

polemics against Islam is perhaps to be found in his treatise *Against Outsiders*, where Theodore states that “to the cross alone (خاصّة) we prostrate ourselves” (§14) thus apparently excluding icons from worship.¹⁸³ Again, the treatise has a problematic transmission history, yet it might still present some indication of Theodore’s own views.

Accordingly, if the preserved text of the debate with al-Mā’mūn is an approximate account of the actual dialogue with the caliph, the absence of any reference to icons remains strange, for the dialogue took place toward the end of Abū Qurra’s life and in Ḥarrān, a city not far from Edessa, for whose famous mandylion of Christ our author had supposedly composed his treatise *On the Veneration of the Holy Icons*, as we shall see below. How could the Muslim have failed to denounce the treatise of Abū Qurra, if it were already in the public domain?¹⁸⁴ Given that icon worship could not but be an obvious target of Muslim polemic writings, how could it have escaped mention? And why would a later compiler have erased or altered any possible references to icons in the original debate? We do have alternative explanations: either the treatise of Abū Qurra was not known at the time, or it was not his. Both possibilities combine, if we consider that the dialogue with Ma’mūn occurred toward the end of Abū Qurra’s life: the treatise *On the Veneration of the Holy Icons* could have circulated posthumously under his name, in which case Abū Qurra cannot be held responsible for all its content. This proposal, however, contradicts the usual accepted dating for the treatise, based on a concrete reference in the text. Let us now consider this point at some length.

Among the arguments of Abū Qurra supporting icon worship, he relates that “in our own day there was a well-known martyr from a family of the highest nobility among the outsiders, whose story is widespread.” He was called Anthony and “used to tell everyone he met that he came to believe in Christianity only because of a miracle he saw in connection with an icon that belonged to St. Theodore, the martyr.”¹⁸⁵

183 J. Lamoreaux, “New Works by Theodore Abū Qurrah, I: Against the Outsiders,” in press.

184 The same silence on icons applies to another undated debate held in the 820s among Abū Qurra, the Jacobite Abū Rā’īta, and the Nestorian metropolitan ‘Abd Īshū; for a summary, see S. T. Keating, “A Christological Discussion,” in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations* (n. 92 above), 553–55.

185 The translation is by Griffith, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 74.

Nothing more is said about this Anthony, but fortunately a *Passio* of his has been preserved in Arabic, from which several versions derive.¹⁸⁶ We learn that he was originally called Rawḥ al-Qurashī and was the nephew of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–809). When still a Muslim he lived—as was usual at the time for members of the Muslim ruling families—in a dependency of a monastery situated in Nayrab, close to the north gate of the city of Damascus. Through a window in his apartment, Rawḥ had direct access to the church of the monastery, consecrated to St. Theodore, so that he was able, unnoticed, to witness liturgy. As he could not bear to contemplate the Christian rites, he entered frequently into the church to disturb the ceremonies, drinking from the chalice or tearing down the crosses. But one day, “when, after the liturgy was over, the priest closed the altar, pulled down the curtains, closed the church with the key and departed for his own business, the Qurashī youth watched toward the altar” and saw an image (*sūra*) of St. Theodore riding on a horse and piercing a serpent with his lance.¹⁸⁷ When Rawḥ tried to shoot the icon with his bow, the arrow turned in

186 For different versions of the Arabic *Passio* and their possible interdependence, see P. Peeters, “S. Antoine le néo-martyr,” *AB* 31 (1912): 410–50; I. Dick, “La passion arabe de S. Antoine Ruwāḥ, néo-martyr de Damas (†25 déc. 799),” *Le Muséon* 74 (1961): 109–33; B. Pirone, “Un altro manoscritto sulla vita e sul martirio del nobile quaryshita Rawḥ,” in *Biblica et Semitica*, ed. L. Cagni (Naples, 1999), 479–509; and especially J. P. Monferrer Sala, “Šahādat al-qiddis Mār Antūniyūs: Replanteamiento de la ‘antigüedad’ de las versiones sinaíticas a la luz del análisis textual,” *Miscelánea de estudios árabes y hebraicos, Sección árabe-Islam* 57 (2008): 237–67, who edits and translates into Spanish the oldest version of the text. Peeters, “S. Antoine,” also edits an Ethiopian version. A late Georgian version is commented upon by P. Peeters, “L’autobiographie de S. Antoine le néo-martyr,” *AB* 33 (1914): 52–63. For an Italian translation of the editions of Peeters and Dick, see E. Braida and Ch. Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Qurashī: Un discendente di Maometo che scelse di divenire cristiano*, Patrimonio Culturale Arabo Cristiano 5 (Turin, 2001), who include a *status quaestionis* in their introduction. A short appraisal of the *Passio* is in D. Vila, “The Martyrdom of Anthony (Rawḥ al-Qurashī),” in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 498–501. For the religious significance of Rawḥ’s conversion to Islam, see also A. Bingeli, “Converting the Caliph: A Legendary Motif in Christian Hagiography and Historiography of the Early Islamic Period,” in *Writing ‘True Stories’: Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Medieval Near East*, ed. A. Papaconstantinou, Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages 9 (Turnhout, 2010), 77–103.

187 My translation. Dick, “Passion arabe,” 120 (Arabic) and 127–28 (French translation).

mid-air and hit Rawḥ, piercing his hand. He did not tell anybody what had happened, but some days later, when a crowd was celebrating the Eucharist in the church, Rawḥ saw, instead of the hosts on the plate and the chalice, a white lamb, above which a dove flew. This second miracle achieved the conversion of Anthony and led, through a series of vicissitudes we need not retell here, to his execution by the caliph. For us, this story is of relevance because Rawḥ was executed by his uncle after Rawḥ's conversion to Christianity in 799, and this provides a terminus post quem for the writing of the treatise of Abū Qurra.¹⁸⁸

However, this reference may well be a later interpolation, for the present version of Abū Qurra's treatise seems to have expanded the original work at certain points.¹⁸⁹ When reviewing the present essay, John Lamoreaux remarked that the chapter divisions and long section headings are not always an accurate description of the contents and "sometimes highlight the role of images in the text at the expense of its other items"; moreover, "the transitions from section to section are quite rough." He concludes that the treatise "is quite unlike anything else written by Theodore" and that "it may be that we are dealing with an abridgment of what was once a longer work." In fact, as Lamoreaux proves in a recent article, such a textual disposition is not exceptional for those works of Abū Qurra that have come to us through the efforts of compilers, as the cross-connections between Abū Qurra's treatise *Against the Outsiders*, the *Dialogue of Abū Qurrah at the Court of al-Māmūn*, and the so-called anonymous *Summa theologiae arabica* clearly prove.¹⁹⁰ We will return to the consequences of this tangled history of transmission, but for the moment it is sufficient to note that it is not problematic to suspect that a particular passage of the treatise on icons might be an interpolation. Indeed, in the instance of the reference to Anthony, there are cogent reasons for interpolation.

To begin with, the mention of the martyr Anthony appears rather unexpectedly, for it is the only

188 I. Dick, *Théodore Abūqurra, Traité du culte des icônes: Introduction et texte critique*, Patrimoine Arabe Chrétien 10 (Jounieh and Rome, 1986), 173.

189 To begin with, a later hand added the abstracts at the beginning of each chapter. Griffith, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 47 n. 90, detects an interpolation.

190 Lamoreaux, "New Works" (n. 183 above).

reference to contemporary matters in the entire treatise. Moreover, a short version of the martyrdom of Rawḥ/Anthony, preserved by both the *Chronicle of 813* and by Michael the Syrian (who probably used Dionysios of Tell Mahrē as a source), does not mention any icon at all; here, the Eucharistic vision is the only miracle that causes the conversion of Anthony.¹⁹¹ In fact, in the *Passio of Rawḥ* it is only after the Eucharistic vision that the Qurayshī converts, whereas he keeps in secret his experience with the wonder-working icon of Theodore. If we consider that the iconoclasts laid emphasis on the Eucharist, against the power of the icons, it appears as if two modes of conversion are contrasted.¹⁹² Might it be that the reference to the wonder-working icon has been interpolated?

A confirmation of this proposal is found in three further versions of the conversion of a Muslim emir to Christianity written about the same time:¹⁹³ the so-called legend of the vision of Amphilog (preserved in Old Slavonic),¹⁹⁴ the vision of Pachomios in Kurum of the Thebaid (preserved in Greek as a Αόγος ἱστορικός attributed to a certain Gregory "Decapolites"),¹⁹⁵ and

191 *Chronicle of 813*, in "Fragmenta chronici anonymi auctoris ad annum domini 813 pertinentia," ed. E. W. Brooks, in *Chronica Minora III*, CSCO 5–6 = Scriptores Syri 5–6, ed. E. W. Brooks, I. Guidi, and J. B. Chabot, 2 vols. (Louvain, 1905), 238–62 (Syriac text) and 183–96 (trans.), here particularly, 253–54 (text) and 192 (trans.); Michael the Syrian 4:487–88 (Syriac text) and 3:18–19 (French trans.) (ed. Chabot). See Binggeli, "Converting the Caliph" (n. 186 above), 80–81. Peeters, "L'autobiographie de S. Antoine" (n. 186 above), also edited a late Arabic version of the Passion (which is very similar to the Georgian), where the story is told in the first person, as if it were an autobiography. In this version Rawḥ shoots at the priest, but a short remark is inserted where the author declares in passing that he had previously shot at an icon. It looks like a gloss to the text made by someone who knew about the existence of the shot icon in other variants of the legend.

192 According to the convincing analysis of Monferrer Sala, "Šahādat al-qiddis Mār Antūniyūs" (n. 186 above), 243, in the oldest Arabic version of the text it is God who produces the wonder of turning back the arrow shot at the icon, whereas later versions attribute this power to the saint himself, which is more in accord with iconodule theories about the intercession of saints through their icons.

193 I thank John C. Lamoreaux for the reference to these texts.

194 E. Kałužniacki, "Die Legende von der Vision Amphilog's und der Logos Historikos des Gregorios Dekapolites," *ASP* 25 (1903): 101–8.

195 PG 100:1201–12. D. J. Sahas, "What an Infidel Saw that a Faithful Did Not: Gregory Dekapolites (d. 842) and Islam," *GOTR* 31 (1986): 47–67, provides an English translation of the text, with a commentary.

the *Story of the Muslim Who Saw a Wondrous Vision in the Shrine of the Megalomartyr George in Lydda* (in Arabic).¹⁹⁶ In these three texts, an Arab emir enters a church (in the last two, it is dedicated to St. George) and witnesses a strange vision when the priest celebrates the Eucharist. In the Arabic text the description of the vision is as follows (trans. Lamoreaux):

He saw a child who was seated on the [Table of] Preparation of the divine oblations. And then, as the priest began to pray and arrange the oblation, the Muslim saw him slaughter the child and drain his blood into the holy chalice, cut him into pieces, and place him on a splendid paten [*diskos*]. The Muslim wondered at this greatly, and was filled with anger and rage at the priest.¹⁹⁷

The vision of the child being slaughtered at the Eucharist is different from the lamb and the dove of our version, but the typology is the same, and the consequence, the conversion of the emir, identical. Not to be overlooked is the reference to military saints (George or Theodore) in all these tales. In any case, the substitution of the lamb (that is, the symbolic representation of Christ) for the child in the later versions may again point to an iconophile rewriting of the vision, which did not need to incorporate, as in the *Passio* of Rawḥ/Anthony, any reference to an icon in order to be accepted by an iconodule reader. Thus, the derivative character of the reference to the icon in the vision of Rawḥ/Anthony is confirmed, as is an ongoing process of the manipulation of texts so as to adapt them to the beliefs of the audience.

Furthermore, the shooting of an icon of Saint Theodore is already mentioned among the *Narrationes*

¹⁹⁶ J. Lamoreaux, "Hagiography," in *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World*, ed. A. Treiger and S. Noble (DeKalb, IL, forthcoming). He refers there to the parallels between the three texts in some detail and conjectures that the author of the Greek version, Gregory Dekapolites, must have originally been called Gregory of Diospolis—that is, the Greek name for Lydda, the place where the vision takes place in the Arabic versions.

¹⁹⁷ The Greek version recounts the vision in this way: "The Saracen saw that the priest took in his hand a child which he slaughtered, drained the blood inside the cup, cut the body into pieces and placed them on the tray" (trans. Sahas).

of Anastasios of Sinai (died after 700).¹⁹⁸ The story now tells of a village called Karsatas, close to Damascus, where a church was consecrated to St. Theodore. One day a group of Arabs entered the church, and one of them shot an arrow against the icon of St. Theodore. The arrow stuck well into the icon's shoulder, which started to bleed, to the amazement of the Muslims. Since they did not convert despite the miracle, they died a few days afterward. The author relates that the icon remained in the same place until his own lifetime.

It is not coincidental that in both texts the temple with a wonder-working icon of St. Theodore is near Damascus. The monastery is likely the same in both texts, although the name of the locality varies. We can then argue that the story of Anastasios of Sinai was reworked into the *Passio* of Rawḥ in order to embellish the narrative of the conversion of the saint, where the Eucharistic vision initially played the central role.¹⁹⁹ Curiously enough, the reference in the *Passio* of Rawḥ to the killing of a dragon in the image may point to the interpolation having been made during the iconoclastic period, for the image of the riding emperor killing a dragon was promoted by Constantine V as a symbol of his fight against idolatry, and, accordingly, St. Theodore became very popular among iconoclasts.²⁰⁰ It is a remarkable paradox that the only icon of a saint mentioned in the work of Abū Qurra was one of the military saints most popular amongst the iconoclasts. Moreover, this would make the image not just an object of worship, but part of the decoration of the church.

¹⁹⁸ The passage of Anastasios Sinaites was edited by F. Nau, "Le texte grec des récits utiles à l'âme d'Anastase (le Sinaite)," *OC* 3 (1903): 56–90, esp. 64–65, with no. 44; it will appear as text no. 2 in the edition that André Bingeli is preparing for Sources chrétiennes. John Damascene, *Against Iconoclasts* 3.91 (ed. Kotter, *Schriften*, vol. 3), reproduces the passage from the Sinaites with slight changes.

¹⁹⁹ Both the miracle of the shot icon and the Eucharistic vision appear separately in Greek and Latin sources of the ninth century concerning St. George, as is discussed by Peeters, "L'autobiographie de S. Antoine" (n. 186 above), 415–16; and Braida and Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Qurāṣī* (n. 186 above), 49–63. This makes the two stories even more of a literary cliché and, accordingly, easy to borrow from text to text.

²⁰⁰ See M.-F. Auzépy, "Constantin, Théodore et le dragon," in *Toleration and Repression in the Middle Ages*, ed. K. Nikolau (Athens, 2002), 87–96 (repr. in Auzépy, *L'histoire*, 317–28). The icon of St. Theodore riding and killing the dragon is even mentioned in an iconoclast *Life* of the eighth century, as was proven by C. Zuckerman, "The Reign of Constantine V in the Miracles of St. Theodore the Recruit (BHG 1764)," *REB* 46 (1988): 191–205.

This possibility would have been heightened if the image of Theodore killing the dragon were painted on the curtains closing off the altar from the nave.²⁰¹

In any case, as the story of the Arab shooting at the icon was undoubtedly concocted, some time was needed after the martyr's death for it to be accepted as genuine. This lag-time would, in turn, make its mention by Rawḥī's contemporary Abū Qurra highly unlikely and confirms that the reference to the icon of Theodore is an iconodule interpolation to Qurra's treatise *On the Veneration of the Holy Icons*.²⁰² The only possible alternative explanation would be to consider the treatise a later compilation based freely on Abū Qurra's works. In either case, the reference to the *Passio* of Rawḥī provides no help in dating the treatise on the icons.

We can however establish a very early terminus ante quem for it. The treatise has been transmitted in just two manuscripts, independently of the other main works of Abū Qurra's Arabic corpus: the British

²⁰¹ Although the text does not say exactly where the icon was placed, I would conjecture that the depiction of Theodore was painted on the curtains that were pulled together by the priest, so that it was visible only when the altar was closed. Paintings of icons on the altar curtains are already attested by Epiphanius of Salamis (310/20–403), who, after entering a church in a village called Anautha (Αναυθά) in Palestine, "came across a dyed curtain hanging on its door [i.e., the "Royal Doors" in the iconostasis or templon screen], which bore some anthropomorphic, idolatrous image, which they [i.e., the local Christians] said on the spot was the representation either of Christ or of one of the saints, for I do not remember well what I saw" (εὑρομένιν βῆλον ἐν τῇ θύρᾳ βαπτών, ἐν δὲ ἔωγράφητο ἀνδροείκελόν τι εἰδωλοειδές. οὐδὲ λεγον τάχα δτι Χριστοῦ ἦν τὸ ἐκτύπωμα ή ἐνδε τῶν ἀγίων. οὐ γάρ μέμνημαι ἡγώ θεασάμενος). Epiphanius, offended at this image, tore it asunder. The text is preserved in Patriarch Nikephoros's *Refutatio et eversio definitionis synodalis anni 815*, ed. J. M. Featherstone, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 33* (Turnhout, 1997), chap. 203; also in a Latin translation of Saint Jerome, which is transmitted as his *Letter 51*. I thank Michael Featherstone for this reference. The text of Epiphanius clearly suggests that the anthropomorphic image on the curtains was mainly decorative and that the local Christians tried to pass it off as an icon of Christ or of a saint in order to protect it (vainly, as it happened) from the zealous foreign visitor. As well, the image of the saint-warrior riding on the dragon in our text also has a decorative character and was not an object of worship, for it was visible to the Arab only when the altar was closed and the church became empty.

²⁰² Cf. Bingeli, "Converting the Caliph," 82–83, who argues that the *Passion* "was composed . . . in the first half of the ninth century," precisely because of the mention by Abū Qurra. However, the existence of so many versions of the *Passio* of Rawḥī proves the popularity of the text among the Melkites and makes a reference to it easy to interpolate into Qurra's treatise.

Library Oriental MS 4950, written by a monk of the monastery of Mar Chariton in Palestine, who finished his work on 1 December 887, and the Sinai Arabic MS 330, perhaps dating to the tenth century. The rest of the works of Abū Qurra, with the exception of a very short treatise and the Greek pieces, are transmitted in manuscripts dating from the twelfth to the eighteenth century.²⁰³ This means that the treatise had a very early success among the Melkites, who attributed it to Theodore. Furthermore, Eutychios, patriarch of Alexandria in the tenth century, already referred in his *Annals* to Abū Qurra as the author of a treatise on images: "Abū Qurrah was also among those who supported bowing down to images. He wrote a book on this, and he named it *Sermons on Bowing Down to Images*."²⁰⁴ This brief remark follows a long excursus about a treatise by patriarch Sophronios of Alexandria on icon worship, composed during the reign of the emperor Theophilus.²⁰⁵ This reference, in turn, provides a further clue to the diffusion of a treatise attributed to Abū Qurra, perhaps linking it with the treatise of Sophronios.

We can conclude, first, that *On the Veneration of the Holy Icons*, as it now stands, was already known in the last quarter of the ninth century and, second, that were it not for that text we would have no other indication that Theodore was a partisan of icon worship. The possibility that the treatise was, in fact, not Theodore's and attributed to him only after his death appears here merely as a *petitio principii*, for a linguistic study of the text and its parallels would be needed to fully support that argument. John Lamoreaux, when reviewing this article, considered this possibility to be unlikely. Since this question has never been discussed in a scholarly publication, I quote his words, as the judgment of a recognized authority on the author:

²⁰³ See J. Lamoreaux, "Theodore Abū Qurra," in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations* (n. 92 above), 439–91, for an overview of the manuscripts.

²⁰⁴ The translation is from S. H. Griffith, "Eutychius of Alexandria on the Emperor Theophilus and Iconoclasm in Byzantium: A Tenth Century Moment in Christian Apologetics in Arabic," *Byzantion* 52 (1982): 154–90, esp. 166–67.

²⁰⁵ For the whole passage, see B. Pirone, *Eutichio patriarca di Alessandria (877–940), Gli Annali: Introduzione, traduzione e note* (Cairo, 1987), 409–11; and below in §§10–11.

Theodore's language and especially some of his technical terms are often quite primitive and sometimes even without parallel in later Melkite literature. And there is a great deal of overlap in the language of this treatise and his other Arabic works. At the same time, there are many shared themes. While Theodore does not discuss icons elsewhere, some of the foundational aspects to his argument in this treatise are well paralleled in those other works: the treatment of Judaism, the criteria by which one distinguishes true from false religions, and most especially, his peculiar notions touching the throne of God, namely, that God is required to be localized, to be in a place, if he is to reveal himself to limited human beings.

However, my colleague Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala, whom I also consulted on this question, counters that there is a strong probability that the work was attributed to Abū Qurra, but not composed by him. As well, he thinks that the present version of the text may have expanded upon a reduced original treatise, a procedure for which parallels are easily found. The prestige of the author would have sufficed to justify the attribution of the text to him, although it might have been written by his school or epigones. Finally, Monferrer Sala contends that using parallels with other works by Theodore risks circular argument, as this is not the only suspect work of Theodore.

As the matter now stands, and in the absence of detailed research, we will continue to consider the text as Theodore's, although probably edited posthumously and with interpolations. We will consider only the general intent of the treatise for the moment in order to avoid giving much weight to single sentences that might not be original. Let us now have a more detailed look on the content of the treatise.

Abū Qurra opens the treatise with the following words:

Abba Yannah, our brother, you who are with us in Edessa, have informed us that many Christians are abandoning the prostration to the icon of Christ our God. In his compassion, for the sake of our salvation, he made it possible for there to be an icon of him, due to his incarnation from the Holy Spirit and from

the Virgin Mary. The same too with the icons of his saints. In the Holy Spirit they were emboldened to enter into the arena to participate with him in his sufferings. By perseverance they enhanced the embellishment of his cross and became leaders of honour for the believers, the memory of whom stirs them to imitate them, and to crowns of victory like theirs.

Anti-Christians, especially ones claiming to have in hand a scripture sent down from God [i.e. the Qur'ān], are reprimanding them for their prostration to these icons, and because of it they are imputing to them the worship of idols, and the transgression of what God commanded in the Torah and the Prophets, and they sneer at them.²⁰⁶

It is obviously on behalf of the famous mandylion of Christ that Abū Qurra, bishop of the suffragan see of Ḥarrān, wrote this apology for the icons. The mandylion was held to be a *true* icon, an ἀχειροποίητον not made by human hands but by Christ himself, who left an imprint of his face on a cloth for the king Abgar of Edessa.²⁰⁷ The mandylion was preserved and worshipped as a relic in the Church of the Icon of Christ in Edessa, enjoyed a special status, and was recognized even by Christians who were not particularly prone to admit icon worship.

The exceptional character of the Edessa icon is attested in the *Book of the Proof* (*Kitab al-Burhān*), a Melkite treatise written in Arabic and traditionally attributed to Eutychios of Alexandria.²⁰⁸ It is now generally attributed to a certain Petros (Buṭrus) son of Nasṭās, bishop of Bayt Ra's in Jordania, who is thought to have written it before the end of the ninth century, the date of the oldest manuscript.²⁰⁹ In the first of the four books of this work, Petros, after having dealt with

206 Translation by Griffith, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 28–29.

207 For the *mandylion*, see Dobschütz, *Christusbilder* (n. 2 above); and, more recently, M. Guscin, *The Image of Edessa* (Boston, 2009), who discusses the origins of the legend and its different versions.

208 P. Cachia and W. M. Watt, eds, *Eutychius of Alexandria: The Book of the Demonstration* (*Kitāb al-Burhān*), CSCO 192–93 = *Scriptores Arabici* 20–21 (part 1, Arabic and English); CSCO 209–10 = *Scriptores Arabici* 22–23 (part 2, Arabic and English) (Louvain, 1960–1961).

209 S. K. Samir, “La littérature melkite sous les premiers abbassides,” *OPC* 55 (1990): 469–86, esp. 483–85. For the author and the work, see the summary of M. N. Swanson, “Peter of Bayt Ra’s,”

the symbol of the cross (§§288–93), makes a detailed enumeration of the relics of Christ and the places of his sanctification in this world, including a list of the most important churches in the Holy Land (§§310–84). At the very end of the list, the icon of Christ in Edessa is mentioned (§384); in fact, this is the only reference to an icon in the entire work. But Petros refers to this icon in a strikingly peculiar way:

The most wonderful of His relics [أثار] [athār] which Christ has bequeathed to us is a napkin [منديل] [mandil] in the church of ar-Ruhā [Edessa] in the region the Jazīra [in Syria]. With this Christ wiped His face and there was fixed on it a clear countenance [حليبة] [ḥilya], distinct from an image/icon [صورة] [ṣūra] and it is not a drawing [رقم] [raqm] or an engraving [نَقْش] [naqsh] and does not change.²¹⁰

The author clearly considers the image of Christ in Edessa not to be an *icon*, but a *relic*. Moreover, he underlines that the usual Arabic word for icon (ṣūra) does not apply to this image of Christ. This emphasis is understandable in an apologetic context, with the author acting out of fear of being branded as icon worshipper or, even worse, an idolater.²¹¹ It is thus the divine origin of this “image” that causes it to be included among the other relics of Christ. No humanly made icons are mentioned in the work, for they provide no “proof” of the existence of the divinity. The defense of the “relic” of Edessa does not apply to them.²¹²

in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 902–6, with recent bibliography.

210 Watt translates the passage as follows: “The most wonderful of His relics which Christ has bequeathed to us is a napkin in the church of ar-Ruhā in the region the Jezireh. With this Christ wiped His face and there was fixed on it a clear image, not made by painting or drawing or engraving and not changing.” I thank Mark Swanson for his help in the analysis of this passage.

211 Av. Cameron, “The History of the Image of Edessa: The Telling of a Story,” in *Okeanos: Essays Presented to Ihor Ševčenko on his Sixtieth Birthday by his Colleagues and Students*, ed. C. Mango, O. Pritsak, and U. M. Pasicnyk (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 80–94, esp. 90–91 (repr. in Cameron, *Changing Cultures* [n. 4 above], no. XI), paid attention to this important passage before it became known that it was not Eutychios in the tenth century, but Petros in the ninth, who wrote it.

212 Griffith, “Bashir/Bēsēr” (n. 17 above), publishes a polemical treatise supposedly written by an Arab prisoner in Byzantium at

It is therefore revealing that Abū Qurra several times equates icons to relics²¹³ and considers as icons certain objects that are certainly not images but relics, like “the most famous icon, the tablets of the Law.”²¹⁴ As we have seen above, this might be seen as a further compromise with the enemies of icons, for the relics had a special authority that humanly made icons did not possess.²¹⁵ Considering this, John Lamoreaux suggests to me that perhaps the text would seem less strange if the Arabic term ṣūra (صورة) were translated not as “icon,” but as “image.” This semantic shift would put some distance between the local polemic on images in Edessa and Byzantine iconoclasm. In fact, it might be that the images initially considered by Theodore were not “icons” as those were understood in Byzantium, but were, perhaps, ex-voto images or even images representing martyrs at their shrines. The distinction is important and has been extensively discussed by Brubaker

the time of Leo III. In the confrontation with the Byzantines, the Arab curiously insists on denouncing the Christian worship of “that made with human hands,” as if he excluded from his criticism the ἀχειροποίητα or relics.

213 See the reference to “graves, bones and icons of the saints” in Griffith, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 44; or to “the bones of the saints, and their icons,” 73; or to the “holy bones” of the prophet Elisha, 89–90.

214 Griffith, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 69.

215 Even the Council of Hiereia in 754 did not attack the relics of the saints. Earlier interpretations, based on iconodule sources, suggested that the Isaurians destroyed relics of saints. S. Gerö, *Byzantine Iconoclasm During the Reign of Constantine V, With Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources*, CSCO 384, Subsidia 52 (Louvain, 1977), 152–65, reviewed the evidence and concluded that it was only Constantine V who, later on during his reign, could have destroyed some relics. However, J. Wortley, “Iconoclasm and Leipsanoclasm: Leo III, Constantine V and the Relics,” *ByzF* 8 (1982): 253–79, though admitting that Constantine V could not have been especially favorable to the cult of relics, insists that no deliberate destruction of them took place during his reign. L. James, “Dry Bones and Painted Pictures: Relics and Icons in Byzantium,” in *Eastern Christian Relics*, ed. A. Lidov (Moscow, 2003), 45–55, considers the differences and similarities between relics and images. P. Magdalino, “L’église du Phare et les reliques de la passion à Constantinople (VII^e/VIII^e–XIII^e siècles),” in *Byzance et les reliques du Christ*, ed. J. Durand and B. Flusin, Centre de recherche d’histoire et civilisation de Byzance. Monographies 17 (Paris, 2004), 15–30, argues that Constantine V may have founded the Church of Pharos for housing the relics of the Passion of Christ. Finally, it is significant that according to Theophanes Continuatus 2.14 the emperor Theophilus paraded through the walls of Constantinople the relics of the Virgin’s robe, but not her icon, as had been the case on prior occasions: see James, “Dry Bones,” 52.

and Haldon, in their analysis of late antique images of saints before the iconoclast crisis.²¹⁶

On the other hand, if even the “image” of Christ in Edessa, as Abū Qurra states, was no longer honored as formerly, we can surmise that icon worship really was questioned at the time. Moreover, the polemical tone of the treatise strongly suggests an open confrontation between defenders and partisans of images. Abū Qurra took up his pen in Edessa in defense of images because there were many Christians abandoning prostration before the icons due to the pressure of the enemies of the Christian faith. In the opening of the treatise, he identifies those enemies as Muslims, for they claim “to have in hand a scripture sent down from God.” Although the Jews are also targeted again and again in the text as the fictional adversaries of Abū Qurra’s arguments, the Islamic authorities were the ones who had the power to enforce legal measures against icon worship and they are deemed responsible for the contemporary change about the cult of images. Thus, the issue of the icons has nothing to do with iconoclasm in the Empire but is, rather, triggered by internal debate among the Eastern Christians, exactly as we also surmised in the cases of Palestinian “iconophobia” in §2 and of John of Damascus in §3.

Abū Qurra is silent in his work about the real numbers of Christians who abandoned icon worship out of fear or simply to accommodate their “iconophobic” Muslim overlords. But in a passage near the end of the treatise, he appears to admit the existence of some kind of “iconophobic” Christians:

If someone [a Christian] says: “The outsiders [Muslims] might reproach us for the cross of Christ without seeing these icons!” [i.e., the icons of the cross with a representation of Christ crucified], let him know this: As for those [i.e., outsiders] who enter our churches, if these icons [with Christ crucified on the cross] weren’t present in our churches, for most of them, what we have mentioned would not occur to them! As for the icons, they are what arouse them to reproach us.²¹⁷

216 Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, esp. 50–66.

217 Mark Swanson revised for me the translation of the passage so that it might closely follow the Arabic syntax. See Griffith, *Treatise on the Veneration*, 95, for an alternative rendering. The following

Earlier in the chapter Abū Qurra argued that it was necessary to have icons of the crucifixion in churches, for these bear witness to the divinity of the crucified Christ. If the Muslims are offended at their sight, this is not a bad thing, for it gives Christians an opportunity for fearless confession. He even stresses that God “will reward us for it, in proportion to his magnanimity, with a reward not lower than the reward of the martyrs.” Now, in this passage, Abū Qurra seems to anticipate an objection from a Christian, who claims that the (aniconic) cross is enough to bring about a reaction from the outsiders against the Christians. Abū Qurra rejects this: if Muslims came into the churches and only saw Christians venerating the plain symbol of the cross, it would not occur to most of them to reproach the Christians; rather, it is the veneration of icons of the crucifixion, not of plain crosses, that provokes reproach.

This argument confirms the existence of churches with icons of the crucified Christ. But by stressing their importance, Theodore seems to imply that this kind of image was, indeed, questioned, for his adversary defends the position that crosses without the image of Christ could render the same function as those with the image. Theodore’s argument is thus implicit evidence that there were at the time some Christians who considered the aniconic cross to be the primary, and perhaps the only, permissible image or symbol to be allowed in the churches. No indication is given of their importance or real numbers, but they were clearly not marginal, for otherwise Abū Qurra would not have written his treatise *On the Veneration of the Holy Icons*.

In this regard, the use of Arabic by Abū Qurra was not a casual choice, but an additional means of showing his adversaries that they all belonged to the same cultural milieu. One might even argue that when Abū Qurra rejected “imperial Greek” and adopted Arabic as the language of religious debate, he addressed ruling Islam, not the Byzantine iconoclasts. The use of a given language always implies certain terminological parameters common to all its speakers; and so, Abū Qurra could not but refer to the Qu’rān in his treatise to cement his arguments.²¹⁸

interpretation of the passage is also indebted to Professor Swanson, per litteras, October 12, 2009.

218 See Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah* (n. 154 above); idem, “Theodore Abū Qurrah’s On the Veneration of the Holy Icons,” *Sacred Art Journal* 13 (1992): 3–19; idem, “Qu’rān in Arab Christian

Theodore's purposeful avoidance of the Council of Nicaea of 787 in his treatise again suggests a local context for it. The council endorsed icon worship and was recognized as the seventh ecumenical council by the Byzantine Church, but Abū Qurra always quotes the six ecumenical councils as the main source of doctrine for the Church,²¹⁹ which might be interpreted as a narrowing of the horizons, of ignorance in the Melkite milieux of what was going on in Constantinople. However, it is inconceivable that the Melkites had no knowledge of the council, for they were in regular contact with the Empire. A lack of access to the proceedings of the council cannot explain their silence, especially since icon worship was discussed.

One must conclude that the Melkites did not have a special interest in Nicaea II, perhaps because it was not considered ecumenical at all,²²⁰ but also because in Nicaea the defense of the icons was made in a straightforward manner, with massive appeal to legends and the tradition. Such a defense was, perhaps, less expedient for the Melkites in Abū Qurra's time, in the midst of an Islamic "iconophobic" milieu, which privileged subtlety and artifice over direct confrontation. Further, icon worshipers in the East likely did not follow their counterparts in the Empire in their overall ritualization of images and, perhaps, simply linked their practice to the traditional cult of particular shrines and their specific images.

If we now take stock, we may conclude that Abū Qurra's treatise *On the Veneration of the Holy Icons* was written for the Melkite community in Edessa and attempted to defend images in general (and the worship of the famous mandylion of Christ, in particular) from the hostility of local Christians and Muslims. Any reference to Byzantium was unnecessary and might have been a source of further troubles for the iconodule Melkites, who tried to prove their proximity to the ruling Abbasid elites by choosing to communicate

Texts" (n. 175 above); and idem, "Monk in the Emir's Majlis" (n. 175 above).

²¹⁹ See Griffith, "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract" (n. 20 above), 57–58; and Lamoreaux, "Biography of Theodore" (n. 154 above), 34. Another option for explaining the silence on icons in the rest of Abū Qurra's works is that he never divulged or published his compromising treatise *On the Veneration of the Holy Icons*, which might have circulated only after his death.

²²⁰ See Henry, "Initial Eastern Assessments" (n. 151 above); and Signes Codoñer, "Die Melkitischen Patriarchen" (n. 71 above).

in Arabic. This reserve would have been especially necessary if Abū Qurra wrote this treatise after 799 and before the outbreak of the second iconoclasm in 815, when icon worship became the official doctrine in Byzantium. These circumstances were exactly the opposite to the ones that moved the Damascene to write his three treatises on the icons against imperial iconoclasm. But the religious climate was also different.

If our analysis holds true, during the eighth century the iconodules were slowly receding in Syria and Palestine before the combined pressure of Islam and their accommodating Christian fellows. This may explain the migration of radical iconodule monks (the Sabaites) to Constantinople and Rome, where they were virulently active in propagating icon worship, as we saw in §3 above. But for the remaining iconodule Melkites prudence or even silence was more advisable. The treatise of Abū Qurra *On the Veneration of the Holy Icons*, if it is by him, might be an exception to this rule.

8. Other Melkite Treatises in Arabic

Sidney Griffith has recently argued that "there are numerous accounts in Greek, Syriac and Arabic, in the histories, chronicles, hagiographies, martyrologies and even in the apologetic treatises produced by Christians living in the caliphate from the eighth to the tenth centuries and beyond, telling of crosses and icons, of their abuse and their veneration, and of their miraculous powers."²²¹ He also lists some testimonies in support of his argument.²²² However, if we narrow the focus to the period ca. 750–850 in the Middle East (leaving aside the particular case of Egypt, for which see §10 below) and consider only the references to Christian icons, not to crosses, Griffith's statement should perhaps be emended.

In fact, with the exception of Abū Qurra's works, practically none of the Arabic Melkite texts of the second half of the eighth and most of the ninth centuries refer to icons or holy images, although these works take up sensitive and controversial points in polemical exchange with Islam.²²³ Moreover, in most of these

²²¹ Griffith, "Iconophilia and Iconophobia" (n. 9 above), 370.

²²² See, in general, Griffith, "Images," (n. 16 above); and idem, "Iconophilia and Iconophobia."

²²³ See Bertaina, *Christian and Muslim Dialogues* (n. 175 above) for a panoramic discussion of the polemical Melkite literature, with

texts the worship of the cross—both the True Cross and the symbol of the cross—is dealt with at some length. It seems as if the cross was the central point in the debate between Islam and Christianity and icon worship was not part of the discussion because it was not admitted by the Christian theologians. Mark Swanson already drew attention to this phenomenon some years ago and remarked on the iconoclast flavor of some of these treatises, but his study has not received the attention it deserves.²²⁴ Let us briefly review the evidence provided by these Melkite texts in order to gain a clearer picture.

The ancient Melkite apology found in *Sinaiticus arabicus* 154, generally known as the *Treatise on the Triune Nature of God*, was dated by Samir Khalil Samir to 750 and, accordingly, has been considered the earliest Arabic Christian apology.²²⁵ However, Swanson later established a date of 788.²²⁶ The text does not contain a single reference to icons or to the cult of the cross, although there are many references to idol worship.

More interesting is the so-called *Summa Theologiae Arabica* (*al-Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān*), an anonymous Melkite treatise in Arabic, originally attributed by Samir to Abū Qurra,²²⁷ but now determined by Griffith to be a compendium of Christian theology written at the monastery of Mar Chariton between

850 and 877.²²⁸ Recently, Lamoreaux has argued for a reconsideration of the whole issue in view of the frequent cross-references between the text and Abū Qurra's works.²²⁹ Although the treatise has, unfortunately, not yet been edited,²³⁰ Swanson made a paraphrase of some chapters of the work, whence it again emerges that the worship of the cross is the focus of the debate, while icons and images receive no consideration.²³¹ Indeed, not only are icons absent, but the contemplation of the cross is described as the way by which the believer ascends to Christ. The cross thus assumes a position as mediator between God and men in a way that is very similar to the icons in iconodule theology. The passage, in Swanson's translation, is as follows:

It is necessary for the believer, when he stands before the cross, to behold it and occupy himself with it (which is the most effective way to concentrate his understanding) and to aspire in his thought toward Christ our Lord as though he were crucified before him, as long as he is in prayer. [That is] because it was through the cross that there came our guidance and our rectitude and the existence of that for which we hope in the hereafter. [It was] in the cross that the friends of God boasted, and in it was their triumph.

Next in time comes the *Dialogue of Abraham of Tiberias* (*Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī*) with 'Abd al-Rahmān

an accurate rendering of the content of the works.

224 M. N. Swanson, "The Cross of Christ in the Early Arabic Melkite Apologies," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750–1258)*, ed. S. K. Samir and J. Nielsen (Leiden, New York, and Cologne, 1994), 115–45.

225 S. K. Samir, "The Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c. 750)," in Samir and Nielsen, *Christian Arabic Apologetics*, 57–114, correcting in many points the old and deficient edition of M. D. Gibson, "An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles with a Treatise in the Triune Nature of God," *Studia Sinaitica* 7 (1899): 74–107 (Arabic) and 2–36 (English). A new edition by Samir is awaited. In the meantime, the Italian translation by M. Gallo, *Palestinese anonimo: Omelia arabo cristiana dell'VIII secolo* (Rome, 1994), can be consulted, as she used the corrections made by Samir.

226 M. N. Swanson, "Some Considerations for the Dating of fī tathlīth Allāh al-wāhid (Sinai Ar. 154) and al-Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān (London, British Library Or. 4950)," *Parole de l'Orient* 18 (1995): 117–41.

227 S. K. Samir, "La 'Somme des aspects de la foi', oeuvre d'Abū Qurrah?" in *Actes du deuxième congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes*, ed. S. K. Samir, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 226 (Rome, 1986) 93–121.

228 S. H. Griffith, "A Ninth Century Summa Theologiae Arabica," in Samir, *Actes*, 123–41; idem, "Islam and the Summa Theologiae Arabica: Rabi' I, 264 A.H.," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990): 225–64; idem, "The First Christian Summa Theologiae in Arabic: Christian Kalām in Ninth Century Palestine," in Gervers and Bikhazi, *Conversion* (n. 24 above), 15–31; and idem, "The View of Islam from the Monasteries of Palestine in the Early Abbasid Period: Theodore Abū Qurrah and the *Summa theologiae Arabica*," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996): 9–28.

229 Lamoreaux, "New Works" (n. 183 above). It is notable that the work was copied in the Monastery of Mar Chariton at approximately the same time as the earliest surviving manuscript of the treatise on the holy icons attributed to Abū Qurra.

230 Swanson, "Cross of Christ" (n. 224 above), 119 n. 20, announced that "Griffith's edition will soon be appearing in the CSCO," but the discovery of new manuscripts of the text has apparently rendered the task of the editor more difficult. For a list of the manuscripts and an overall assessment of the work, see idem, "Al-Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān," in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations* (n. 92 above), 791–98.

231 Swanson, "Cross of Christ," 140–41.

al-Hāsimī, dated by its modern editor to 820, although our version might be a later literary reworking of the actual debate.²³² In the dialogue there is, again, no single reference to the icons, but only to man as image of God.²³³ However, there is a special discussion about the worship of the cross,²³⁴ which the author utterly rejects.

Another Melkite text of the period, also still unedited,²³⁵ is preserved in *Sinaiticus arabicus* 434. It contains a religious debate between a Muslim emir and a Christian. Griffith published a study of it with an accurate summary of its content and titled it, conventionally, *Answers for the Shaykh*.²³⁶ Haddad has suggested 780 as the year of its composition,²³⁷ while Griffith dates it to the late ninth century, if not to the tenth. Whatever the precise date, the text holds not a single reference to icons.

Nor is there any discussion of icons or images in the correspondence of the eminent Melkite translator and physician Qusṭā Ibn Lūqā (835–912) with the Muslim Ibn al-Munajjim and the Nestorian Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq.²³⁸

²³² For the edition and a study of the work, see G. B. Marcuzzo, ed., *Le Dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade avec 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Hāsimī à Jérusalem vers 820: Étude, édition critique et traduction annotée d'un texte théologique chrétien de la littérature arabe*, Textes et Études sur l'Orient Chrétien 3 (Rome, 1986). The dating ca. 820 given by the editor is approximate, as the author mistakenly says that Ma'mūn reigned from 813 to 822 (104). Theoretically, the debate could have taken place after 819, when Ma'mūn entered Baghdad, until 833, the time of his death.

²³³ *Dialogue* §§196–97 (ed. Marcuzzo).

²³⁴ Ibid. §§512–34.

²³⁵ In an email sent on 13 August 2009, Mark Swanson informed me that Eid Salah has already finished the edition of the Arabic text (alternatively known as *Masā'il wa-ajwibah 'aqliyyah wa-ilāhiyyah*). This edition will be published with an English translation by Swanson.

²³⁶ S. H. Griffith, "Answers for the Shaykh: A 'Melkite' Arabic Text from Sinai and the Doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation in 'Arab Orthodox' Apologetics," in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. E. Grypeou, M. N. Swanson, and D. Thomas (Leiden, 2006), 277–309.

²³⁷ R. Haddad, *La trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes (750–1050)* (Paris, 1985), 38. He is followed by R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, 1997), 504–5.

²³⁸ S. K. Samir and P. Nwyia, eds., *Une correspondance islamochrétienne entre Ibn al-Muṇaġġim, Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq et Qusṭā Ibn Lūqā*, PO 40.4 (Turnhout, 1981). Only in §234 is there a mention of the statues and images of the ancients that the modern artists are not any more able to reproduce.

Finally, the evidence from historical or hagiographic sources is scanty and not as conclusive as first appears. The *Life of Anthony/Rawḥ* contains a reference to an icon of St. Theodore, which is suspicious for its conventional nature, as we argued above in §7. In the *Life of Timothy of Kākhushtā*, the saint prays only once to an icon—of the Virgin, to which he turns following his prayers to God. Curiously enough, God grants what Timothy demands of him, so that the prayer of Timothy to the Virgin's icon merely causes her to appear and intercede for him before God. Moreover, when Timothy tells the people of the success of his prayer he does not mention the appearance of the Virgin.²³⁹ Although the saint lived in the beginning of the ninth century, his *Life* is to be used with caution, for it appears to have suffered much reworking at a later stage, when the remains of the saint were translated to Antioch in the middle decades of the eleventh century.²⁴⁰

It is even more significant that the numerous Muslim writers who entered into polemics with contemporary Christians apparently never refer to icon worship among them.²⁴¹ This observation is not a proof for the predominance of iconoclast approaches, for Christian practices were not always the target of the discussion and the debate focused on theological questions.²⁴² Moreover, many of the Muslim treatises

²³⁹ J. C. Lamoreaux and C. Cairala, eds., *Life of Timothy of Kākhushtā* (Turnhout, 2000), §§35 (P) and §42 (S).

²⁴⁰ See J. C. Lamoreaux, "The Life of Timothy of Kākhushtā," in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 919–22.

²⁴¹ Jāhīz, who wrote a refutation of the Christians before 847, criticized their anthropomorphism, but did not mention the icons in his invective, although he says at the end of his treatise that he will deal with the topic elsewhere; see D. Thomas, "Al-Jāhīz," in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 706–12; and I. S. Allouche, "Un traité de polémique christiano-musulmane au IX^e siècle," *Hesperis* 26 (1939): 123–53, esp. 142–43 and 153, for the translation of the passages. 'Abd Allāh ibn Ismā'il al-Hāsimī, perhaps a relative of the caliph Ma'mūn and writing under his reign, claims to have had discussions with Melkites, Jacobites, and Nestorians; he criticizes Christians only for the worship of the cross, but does not mention icons; see L. Bottini, *Al-Kindī, Apología del cristianismo*, Patrimonio Culturale Arabo-Cristiano 4 (Milan, 1997), 47 and 69.

²⁴² B. Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Babirā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden and Boston, 2009), 98–100, argues that the silence of Muslim writers on the icons is explained by their focus on the cult of the cross, because that had more important theological implications for Christian dogma.

have been lost or are in need of better editions.²⁴³ But, taken as a whole, this silence of the Muslim polemicists is striking, for connections between icon worship and theological issues were certainly not lacking in the Christian authors (as we saw in our discussion of *Abū Qurra*), and would likely have been an easy target for contemporary Muslim theologians. Icon worship proves to be a minor issue in the polemics between Muslims and Christians in the ninth century. Even in the letter of the caliph *Hārūn al-Rashīd* to the emperor Constantine VI and written by the Arab scholar *Ibn al-Layth* (d. ca. 819), reputedly sent ca. 796 (a few years after Nicaea II), no mention is made of icons.²⁴⁴

However, it would be unwise to conclude that Melkite Christians in the ninth century were indifferent to icon worship, for many texts of the period remain unedited or lack a comprehensive study. Anyway, the general silence on icons that we have observed in the Melkite theologians of the time does allow us to conclude that, at least for a significant portion of the ninth century, the Church hierarchy of the Melkites did not try to incorporate the cult of icons, which was surely present at a private or popular level, into dogma, as the Byzantine Church did in 787. There was apparently no need for such a move, which would likely have provoked contemporary “iconophobic” Muslims (see §§2–3), with whom Melkites frequently debated religious matters.

9. Two Greek Melkite Lives

It is telling that one of the few iconodule texts written in Greek in the East during this period, the *Life of Stephen the Sabaite*, has only one passing mention of icons. Leontios of Neapolis wrote this *Life* in Palestine

²⁴³ For Muslim polemicists against Christianity, mainly in the eighth and ninth centuries, see Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 347–53, 371–74, 532–49, 582–84, 611–13, 618–21, 649–51, 656–60, 669–74, 695–701, 706–16, 723–25, 746–50, 762–67. Most of these entries have been written by the editor of the volume, David Thomas, who in an email of 23 March 2010 confirmed that “we cannot know directly whether Muslims attacked the idea of icons in the ninth century, because very few of their works have survived. The few that have tend to focus on Christian doctrines that related to the Muslim doctrine of tawhid, and do not say much about Christian practices.” For a short overview of the Muslim polemicists, see D. Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū ʻIsā al-Warrāq’s ‘Against the Trinity’* (Cambridge, 1992), 31–50.

²⁴⁴ H. Eid, *Lettre du calife Hārūn al-Rashīd à l’empereur Constantin VI* (Paris, 1992).

early in the ninth century, shortly after the death of his hero and spiritual father, the Melkite monk Stephen (d. 794), whom he knew personally.²⁴⁵ The icons appear in the midst of an account of the author’s personal experience. Leontios explains how “the wicked devil of blasphemy” (ὁ τῆς βλασφημίας ὀλέθριος δαίμων) began to assail him with temptations scarcely a week after he had arrived at the monastery of St. Sabas.²⁴⁶ After some struggle, Stephen freed Leontios from temptation and confirmed him in his faith. As a result, Leontios, although he did not at first “desire to look on the holy icons, except when forced to do it” (οὐτε τὰς θείας καθορᾶν εἰκόνας προεθυμούμην ἀλλ’ ἡ βεβιασμένος), repented and “yearned strongly to attend at all times the life-giving Eucharist and to kiss the blessed icons with a pure heart” (τὰς ἀγίας ἐν εἰλικρινείᾳ περιπτύσσεσθαι εἰκόνας).²⁴⁷ Nothing in the text indicates that the temptations undergone by Leontios had anything to do with iconoclasm, but it is striking that upon his arrival at Mar Sabas he was apparently *forced* to behold them. The newcomer seems to have been reluctant to observe icon worship, as was customary in the Palestinian monastery. His healing (or, perhaps, better, his conversion to icon worship?) took almost two years.²⁴⁸

It would, however, be misleading to put too much stress on this anecdote, for it is the only mention of an icon in the text. As Auzépy has already noted, the “purist” position represented at St. Saba by Stephen and his wide circle of disciples and supporters, as described by Leontios, placed great emphasis on the power of the eucharist for effecting healings and producing dioratic visions by means of the cross, oil, or even physical contact, but never by icons. As Auzépy observed, this practice was closer to the theology of Constantine V than to that of patriarch Tarasios, the mastermind of Nicaea II. Stephen remained, it is important to note,

²⁴⁵ For this *Life*, see Auzépy, “Palestine à Constantinople” (n. 64 above), 184–93; and J. C. Lamoreaux, “Leontius of Damascus,” in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 406–10.

²⁴⁶ J. Pien, ed., “Vita S. Stephani Sabaitae,” *AASS*, July 3:524–613, here §116.

²⁴⁷ Ibid. §123. For the Arabic version, see *The Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas*, ed. J. C. Lamoreaux, CSCO 578 = Scriptores Arabici 50 (Arabic text) and CSCO 579 = Scriptores Arabici 51 (English trans.) (Louvain, 1999), here §59.4; throughout, the Greek εἰκόνας is faithfully rendered by *iqūnā*.

²⁴⁸ Leontios, *Life of Stephen the Sabaite* (Greek) §118: οὕτως διέμεινα διετῇ χρόνον παρὰ τρεῖς ἡ τέσσαρας μῆνας (ed. Pien).

a very influential figure in Palestine at the end of the eighth century.²⁴⁹

Although several patriarchs of Jerusalem are mentioned in the *Life* (Theodore, Elias II, a second Theodore, and Thomas), nothing is said of their attitude to icon worship. On the other hand, we are informed about the fragile and delicate position of the patriarchs themselves before the Muslim authorities: Elias II is denounced, deposed, and sent into exile in Baghdad, while the usurper Theodore takes his place, profiting from his good relations with the Palestinian emir.²⁵⁰ Under these circumstances, it seems unlikely that the Melkite patriarchates ever risked provoking the Muslim authorities by openly embracing or defending icon worship. Icons were, perhaps, only worshipped in the intimacy of monasteries, but without having a prominent role in the liturgy, as we have already suggested. In any case, as Ognibene has remarked, monasteries like Mar Sabas were less affected by the “iconophobia” of the eighth century.²⁵¹

When we compare the *Life of Stephen the Sabaite* with the contemporary *Life of Stephen the Younger* the differences are striking.²⁵² The latter was written in Constantinople by Stephen, deacon of Hagia Sophia, ca. 807–809, to honor the homonymous saint, who had died during the reign of Constantine V about forty years earlier. Both the setting of the saint’s life in the Byzantine Empire and his heroic status as the leader of the iconodule monks against the iconoclasts prompts the expectation of regular reference to icons, for the author wrote during the iconodule period after the Council of Nicaea in 787 and before the reestablishment of iconoclasm by Leo V in 815.

Of particular interest is the saint’s recollection of the frequent anathemas against iconoclasm issued by the eastern patriarchs. He speaks before an audience of iconophile monks worried about the call of Constantine V for an iconoclast council:

Is there any need of speaking about the patriarchs of Rome and Antioch, of Jerusalem and Alexandria? They not only detested and anathematized the hateful dogma of the icon-burners but also through their defamatory letters did not cease to abuse the impious emperor who consented to it, naming him apostate and heresiarch.²⁵³

As we saw above in §3, the anathema pronounced by the three Melkite patriarchs against Hieria, as reported by the *Life of Stephen the Younger*, contrasts with the silence of Theophanes in his chronicle, where no reaction of the eastern patriarchates against Byzantine iconoclasm is mentioned. Our text, written some time after Nicaea II and serving official iconodule propaganda, seems to have amplified the support of the eastern patriarchates for the council of 787, as recorded in the Acts, by making them oppose Constantine V. Moreover, the reference to ἐπιστολαῖς στηλιτευτικαῖς—“defamatory letters”—reminds us of the λόγος στηλιτευτικός, a work usually known as *Adversus iconoclastas*, which was written in Rome ca. 770 by a Greek iconodule. This certainly defamatory text against iconoclasts served as a short presentation of the iconophile dossier of sources preserved in *Parisinus Graecus 1115*.²⁵⁴ That this dossier of texts was made by the Sabaites, who were well connected with Palestine,²⁵⁵ can explain why it was reputed to have originated in the east.

249 Auzépy, “Palestine à Constantinople” (n. 64 above), 190–92 and 213. A. Kazhdan, “Kosmas of Jerusalem: Can We Speak of his Political Views?” *Le Muséon* 103 (1990): 329–46 (repr. in A. Kazhdan, *Authors and Texts in Byzantium* [London, 1993], no. XI), also argued, although with some prudence, for iconoclastic sympathies in the hymnographic works of Kosmas of Jerusalem, a contemporary Melkite writer and fellow countryman of John of Damascus. His supposition was based on a reappraisal of his biography; see idem, “Kosmas of Jerusalem: A More Critical Approach to his Biography,” *BZ* 82 (1989): 122–32 (repr. in *Authors*, no. X).

250 Leontios, *Life of Stephen the Sabaite* (Greek) §§19–23 and 44–49 (ed. Pien); see Auzépy, *L’hagiographie* (n. 71 above), 215–18.

251 Ognibene, *Umm Al-Rasas* (n. 28 above), 112–13.

252 For the *Life*, see also Auzépy, *L’hagiographie*.

253 Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger* §28: Τί δὲ χρὴ λέγειν περὶ τῶν προέδρων τοῦ τε ὢρμης καὶ Ἀντιοχείας, Ἱεροσολύμων καὶ Ἀλεξανδρείας; Οὕτινες οὐ μόνον ἀπεβδελύξαντο καὶ ἀνεθεμάτισαν τὸ μυστήριον τῶν εἰκονοκαυστῶν δόγμα, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐπιστολαῖς στηλιτευτικαῖς οὐκ ἐπαύσαντο καθυβρίζειν τὸν πρὸς τοῦτο ἐπινεύσαντα ἀσεβῆ βασιλέα, ἀποστάτην καὶ αἱρεσιάρχην αὐτὸν ἀποκαλοῦντες (ed. Auzépy).

254 Alexakis, *Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115* (n. 77 above), 93–100. For the text, see PG 109:501–16.

255 Auzépy, “Sabaites” (n. 125 above), 309–10.

10. Icon Worship among Copts, Jacobites, and Nestorians

Following our review of all the evidence of icon worship among the Melkites, we can turn our attention to some further testimonies scattered in literary sources written by members of other Eastern Christian churches, as they may complement or correct the conclusions obtained so far.



In Egypt, Coptic Christian icons of late antiquity clearly continue the ancient pagan and Roman iconographic traditions.²⁵⁶ Monasteries, in particular, seem to have developed this tradition, as demonstrated by the secco paintings in the “jeweled style” of the north and south apse of the dome of the Red monastery of Shenoute in Sohag, with representations of the Christ child suckling from Mary’s breast facing the adult enthroned Christ (dating to the seventh century)²⁵⁷ or in the recently uncovered Nativity paintings of a room in a building complex on the north of the monastery of Bawīt (dating perhaps as late as the eighth century),²⁵⁸ both in the Upper Nile. But at the same time, in Kellia, in the northwestern Nile delta, closer to urban centers, we find a strong preference for painting of crosses and very rare figural representations, a circumstance that may suggest “differences in monastic practice or doctrine.”²⁵⁹

256 As has been proven by M. Rassart-Debergh, “De l’icône païenne à l’icône chrétienne,” *Le Monde Copte* 18 (1990): 39–70, and more recently by the excellent monograph of L. Török, *Transfigurations of Hellenism: Aspects of Late Antique Art in Egypt AD 250–700* (Leiden, 2005), esp. 288–302 and 334–50, where the author concludes that pagan icons (and imperial portraits), but not mummy portraits, are the main source for the genre of Christian icons.

257 Good pictures in E. S. Bolman, “Late Antique Aesthetics, Chromophobia, and the Red Monastery, Sohag, Egypt,” *Eastern Christian Art* 3 (2006): 1–24. See also eadem, “The White Monastery Federation and the Angelic Life,” in *Byzantium and Islam* (n. 2 above), 75–80. Interestingly, the holy images are depicted in the upper levels of the church, whereas the niches below remain aniconic.

258 D. Bénazeth, “The Coptic Monastery of Bawit,” in *Byzantium and Islam*, 81–86. Paintings of the sixth to eighth centuries have also been preserved in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea; see E. S. Bolman, *Monastic Visions: Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Read Sea* (New Haven, 2002), esp. 31–36.

259 E. S. Bolman, “Depicting the Kingdom of Heaven: Paintings and Monastic Practice in Early Byzantine Egypt,” in *Egypt in the*

Also significant are two cycles of images from the beginning of the eighth century that offer evidence of the decorative function of images in the religious art of the time. The first is a carved wooden lintel from the Coptic church of al-Mu’allaqa in Old Cairo, presently in the Coptic Museum. It contains two pictorial scenes of high quality from the life of Christ (the Entry into Jerusalem and the Ascension), accompanied by a lengthy Greek inscription that attributes the work to the Coptic patriarch Theodore and that dates it to the Diocletianic year 451, corresponding to 735.²⁶⁰ The second is a fresco with a sequence of episodes from the life of St. Menas, which is poorly preserved in a small church in Jême (western Thebes), a provincial country town. In this case, the portraits of the donors, Elisabeth and her daughter, have been preserved at the end of the cycle. As this Elisabeth is documented in contemporary legal texts of the town, we can date the frescoes to a period between 719 and 738.²⁶¹ Both the lintel and the frescoes bear witness to the use of images for decoration and instructional purposes, but not as objects of worship.

Until now, no iconic representations in the altar area have been preserved, although a double-sided icon with Saint Theodore and the Archangel Gabriel from Bawīt may have originally been placed in the screen separating the nave from the *khurus*, a position that recalls the image of Theodore and the dragon that we commented upon in the *Passio of Antony Rawḥ*.²⁶²

Byzantine World, 300–700, ed. R. S. Bagnall (Cambridge, 2007), 408–33, here 411–18 and (for the quotation) 426.

260 For the previous bibliography and edition of the inscription, with its correct dating, see L. S. B. MacCoull, “Reading the Inscription of El-Moallaqa,” *ZPapEpig* 64 (1986): 230–34. See also G. Peers, “Vision and Community among Christians and Muslims: The al-Mu’allaqa Lintel in its Eighth Century Context,” *Arte Medievale* 6, no. 1 (2007): 25–46 (with good reproductions) and B. Ratliff, “Al Mu’allaqa Lintel,” in *Byzantium and Islam*, 71–72. The doubts raised by Török, *Transfigurations* (n. 256 above), 351–58, about the dating of the lintel have been convincingly refuted by J. van der Vliet, “Perennial Hellenism! László Török and the al-Mu’allaqa Lintel (Coptic Museum inv. no. 753),” *Eastern Christian Art* 4 (2007): 77–80.

261 See D. W. Wilber, “The Coptic Frescoes of Saint Menas at Medinet Habu,” *ArtB* 22 (1940): 86–103, for a first dating and an accurate description of the scenes, accompanied by sketches; and T. G. Wilfong, *Women of Jeme: Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt* (Ann Arbor, 2002), 95–98, for the identification of the donors.

262 Bénazeth, “Monastery of Bawit,” 85–86.

Coptic icons become rare after the seventh century for many centuries, a circumstance that could be related to the new Muslim rulership or, alternatively, to new iconoclastic tendencies appearing in contemporary Christianity.²⁶³ As far as the textual sources are concerned, references to icons in Egypt also become extremely rare after the seventh century except for the Coptic homiletic texts of the eighth and ninth centuries, where icon worship is occasionally mentioned but placed in a late antique setting that makes their interpretation controversial.²⁶⁴ Precisely dated are, on the contrary, two stories that appear in the *History of the Patriarchs* of the Coptic writer Ibn Mufarrij. In the first, it is reported that the mighty son of the governor of Egypt died ca. 705 after he had spat upon the image of the Virgin and the Child, which was carried in procession, according to the rule.²⁶⁵ Some time later, during the reign of Marwān II (744–50), we are told that a Muslim saw painted “on the wall” of the Church of the Virgin in Alexandria a picture of Christ on the cross, but when he went up “to the upper gallery” and pierced it with a rod, he was crucified on the spot after the likeness of the picture and could descend only after confessing the Christian faith.²⁶⁶ Both stories are situated in a context of hostility of Muslims toward Christian imagery. Significantly, whereas the first story mentions outdoor and customary processions of icons, the second, dated some decades later, tells how a Muslim discovers an icon of Christ painted high on the wall of a church and mounts to the gallery to destroy it; it is as if the visibility of icons for the Muslim lords had decreased over the course of a few decades.²⁶⁷

263 L. Langen, “La peinture d’icônes,” *Le Monde Copte* 13 (1990): 7–18, here 13–14, sees no clear cause for the absence of Coptic icons between the seventh and the eighteenth century. She refers only to the destruction of old icons for making the holy *myron* and mentions iconoclastic episodes in modern times during the reign of patriarch Cyril IV (1854–61).

264 See for instance L. S. B. MacCoull, “Sinai Icon B.49: Egypt and Iconoclasm,” *JÖB* 32 (1982): 407–13 for the story of Euphemia, who ordered an icon of Saint Michael to be painted so that it could watch over her in her bedroom after the death of her husband, general of emperor Honorius. For a homily exalting the cross see instead A. Campagnano, *Ps. Cirillo di Gerusalemme, Omelie copte* (Milan, 1980), 75–149.

265 Ibn Mufarrij, *History of the Patriarchs*, 305–8 (ed. Evtets).

266 Ibid., 402–4.

267 For iconoclast emperors allowing icons to remain high on the walls of the churches, see “Michaelis et Theophili imperatorum

A case apart is presented by a small group of icons dating to the iconoclastic period, which are preserved in the orthodox (Melkite) monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai. Although Kurt Weitzmann attributed them to a Palestinian milieu, this is far from certain.²⁶⁸ Weitzmann’s chronology was based on the internal evolution of artistic trends and a comparison with icons of other areas, but he could not prove that the icons came to Sinai at an early stage nor that they were, in fact, manufactured in Palestine. Indeed, some might have been painted by Palestinian iconodule émigrés in Byzantium or Italy, like the Sabaïtes, and might have come to Sinai from these areas (like the Constantinopolitan icon, Weitzmann’s fig. 50).²⁶⁹ Weitzmann even notes a striking resemblance between an icon of the crucifixion at Sinai²⁷⁰ and a fresco of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome dating to the period of the Greek Pope Zacharias (741–752). He explains the parallel by Palestinian influence on the Roman painter, rather than by the possibly Palestinian origin of the painter himself.

A recent study of these icons by Brubaker and Haldon²⁷¹ questions the existence of Weitzmann’s “Sinai house style,” as well as its almost exclusively Palestinian connections. In their analysis of the preserved exemplars, they tend, rather, to reinforce the parallels with Roman, Egyptian (Coptic!), and, even occasionally, Byzantine models. Most importantly, Sinai icons, Brubaker and Haldon argue, are not

epistola,” ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc., *Leges 3, Concilia 2.2* (Hannover and Leipzig, 1908), 475–80, here 479 ll. 17–18.

268 Only eight of the sixty-one icons of the monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai listed by K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons*, vol. 1: *From the Sixth to the Tenth Century* (Princeton, 1976), are unquestionably dated by him to the eighth and ninth centuries. Seven of them are attributed to the Palestine school (nos. 36, 37, 39, 40, 41, 47, and 48) and only one (no. 50) to a Constantinopolitan painter. For the icons of the Coptic Museum in Cairo, see P. P. V. van Moorsel, M. Immerzeel, and L. Langen, *Catalogue général du Musée Copte: The Icons* (Cairo, 1994), as well as the short introduction of P. P. V. van Moorsel and M. Immerzeel, “A Short Introduction into the Collection of Icons in the Coptic Museum in Old-Cairo,” in *Coptology: Past, Present, and Future; Studies in Honour of Rodolphe Kasser*, ed. S. Giversen, M. Krause, and P. Nagel (Louvain, 1994), 35–44.

269 Weitzmann, *Monastery of St. Catherine*, fig. 50.

270 Ibid., fig. 36.

271 Brubaker and Haldon, *Iconoclast Era*, 320–36, with images of the nine icons considered.

“luxury icons” and were, accordingly, not products of wealthy urban centers, but rather produced “for clients of restricted means.”²⁷² Pilgrims to the monastery from all over the Mediterranean were probably influential in the production and preservation of the icons, for which no single pattern or school can be established. It is doubtful that these icons were, in most cases, more than ex voto images. Their use for the cult was not assured at the time of their arrival; finally, their preservation in such a peripheral area speaks for their marginalization from urban churches.

Finally, the *Annals* of Eutychios, Melkite patriarch of Alexandria in the tenth century, provide us with a summary of a work on image worship by his predecessor Sophronios, who ascended to the see towards the end of Theophilos’s reign. The passage is inserted in the reign of caliph Mutawakkil (847–861), although it refers to the appointment of Theophilos as emperor in 829.²⁷³ Sophronios is there said to have convinced Theophilos to restore icon worship, which makes the story clearly suspect, but recently two treatises on icon worship attributed to Sophronios have been discovered in the Harleianus 5665, fols. 1r–47r. Before John Duffy completes the edition for the *Corpus Christianorum* nothing can be said for certain, but it appears suggestive to suppose that they were written after Theophilos’s death, as a consequence of change in the attitude toward icons in the Melkite Church. It is also significant that the treatises are written in Greek, not in Arabic, although John Duffy has proved that local iconoclasts were the recipients of Sophronios’s refutation.²⁷⁴



Among Syrian Monophysites or Jacobites, icons are not frequently mentioned in the literary sources for the eighth to ninth centuries, whereas more evidence can be collected for the sixth to seventh.²⁷⁵ Nevertheless, they do figure prominently in some texts that deserve our attention.

In an unedited dialogue in Syriac written ca. 720, Abraham, a monk in the monastery of Bēt Ḥalē (perhaps near Kufa in Iraq), discusses Christian dogma with an Arab notable.²⁷⁶ In the dialogue, according to the recent overview made by Gerrit J. Reinink, it is when the Arab stresses that “we worship neither the cross, nor the bones of the martyrs, nor images as you do,” that the Syrian monk feels obliged to start a lengthy defense of images, crosses, and the bones of martyrs (in that order). In his defense of the images, the monk refers first to three passages of the Old Testament that prove that Hebrews venerated inanimate things, namely the “column of fire” of Exodus 13:21, the serpent of brass of Numbers 21:8–9, and the ark of the covenant. These three instances are compared to, respectively, the “enlightening” presence of Christ in the Last Judgement, the veneration of the cross, and the prostration of the priest before the altar. Thus far, no mention of icons has been made, and it is evident that “images” are primarily understood as representations or created things, but not as icons. The Arab notable then persists in asking, “what is the reason that you venerate the cross, although he (Christ) did not order it in his Gospel?” At this point, the monk begins his defense of the Cross:

When we truly know that our Lord is the Son of God, and when He is considered by us as Lord, Saviour and Judge, [then] it is appropriate that

²⁷² Ibid., 335.

²⁷³ Eutychios, *Annals* 409–11 (trans. Pirone).

²⁷⁴ J. Duffy, “Recovering a Byzantine Author: Sophronius of Alexandria,” paper delivered at the twenty-eighth annual Byzantine Studies Conference, The Ohio State University, Columbus, 2002. See also E. Lamberz, “Vermisst und gefunden: Zwei Texte des Sophronios von Alexandria zur Bilderverehrung, die Akten des VII. Ökumenischen Konzils und eine Patriarchenurkunde des XI. Jahrhunderts in einem griechischen Codex aus dem Besitz des Nikolaus von Kues (Harleianus 5665)”, *Römische Historische Mitteilungen* 45 (2003): 159–80. Further discussion in Griffith, “Eutychius of Alexandria” (n. 204 above) and Signes Codoñer, *The Emperor Theophilos* (n. 24 above), chap. 21.7.

²⁷⁵ See Brock, “Iconoclasm and the Monophysites” (n. 90 above), 55–56.

²⁷⁶ For this text, see now Reinink, “Veneration of Icons” (n. 19 above), with p. 334 for the passage quoted below. See also S. H. Griffith, “Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bēt Ḥalē and a Muslim Emir,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3, no. 1 (2000); G. J. Reinink, “Political Power and Right Religion in the East Syrian Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Ḥalē and an Arab Notable,” in Grypeou, Swanson and Thomas, *Encounter* (n. 236 above), 153–69, esp. 160–61; Griffith, “Iconophilia and Iconophobia” (n. 9 above), 347–49; Teule, “Veneration of Images” (n. 9 above), 333–34; and B. Roggema, “The Disputation Between a Monk of Bēt Ḥalē and an Arab Notable,” in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 268–73.

we do everything that He commands us. And we venerate and honour His image [şalmeh], because He impressed [it] with His face and handed [it] over to us, and whenever we look at His icon [yuqneh], we see Him and we honour the image [şalmā] of the King because of the King.

The Arab refers to the famous image that Christ had made of himself and sent to Abgar, the King of Edessa. The discussion seems to center on this particular icon, not made by human hands and nearly a relic,²⁷⁷ as if this exceptional case were the only one worth mentioning. Nothing is said of other kinds of icons, painted by human hands. In fact, the preceding discussion, as we have seen, was about “images” in general; the word for “icon” is used only for the Edessa image, as if it represented a very particular image worshipped by the Christians.²⁷⁸ This particular image clearly had a special relevance, but one can doubt that its defense automatically validated the worship of other icons (as Reinink maintains), insofar as they were not sanctioned as relics by Christ himself. Indeed, the argument of the passage suggests that most icons would not be images to which honor should be paid, for they were neither given by Christ nor images of “kings.”

Moreover, the discussion that follows deals extensively with the cross, which is, in fact, the main point of it: the reference to images was made in order to justify the cult of the cross. Now, the author defends not only the symbolic value of the cross, but also its supernatural, miracle-working force, a power he did not attribute to images or icons. Finally, his defense of the cross as a sign for victory clearly recalls iconoclastic propaganda. A defense of the bones of the martyrs as relics

277 See above, §7.

278 Michael the Syrian 4:447–49 (Syriac text) and 3:475–77 (French trans.) (ed. Chabot) mentions disputes between Melkites and Syrians at Edessa about the image of the mandylion of Christ during the caliphate of 'Abd al-Mālik (685–705). Michael the Syrian, working from an oral account preserved by ancient relatives of Dionysios of Tell Maḥrē, tells that the image was taken from the temple by a tax collector in order to exert pressure on the population to pay the taxes due. Only through the mediation of a rich Edessan, who kept the image secretly at his home and paid the money required, was the crisis overcome. This episode, taking place before the iconoclastic struggle in Constantinople, again points to the increasing pressure of Islam against images and may explain the defense of the Edessian icon in the present treatise.

then follows, which confirms that we are still far from an autonomous worship of the icons as representations of divinity.

Reinink argues that the emir Maslama, to whose entourage the Arab notable of the dialogue belongs, was the son of caliph 'Abd al-Mālik, who was governor of both Iraqs in 720–721. These years overlap with the reign of caliph Yazid II who is, as we saw in §1, made responsible for an “iconoclastic” edict. Insofar as Maslama was entrusted, according to a Syrian source, with carrying the edict into effect, we discover further context for our text, as well as confirmation that there was no icon worship or cult of images in Syria at the time, at least as Byzantine iconodules understood it.

A second Syrian text that deals with images must be adduced: the so-called *Disputation of Sergios the Stylite with a Jew*.²⁷⁹ The text, traditionally dated to the sixth century, was redated to the eighth by its editor A. P. Hayman on the basis of repeated references to the 700 years that have elapsed since the destruction of Jerusalem.²⁸⁰ This argument is problematic, as we know of a stylite living in Gousit (near Emesa), as was Sergios, around 635. If our text was not actually written by the Stylite himself, as it claims, the possibility arises that it might have been later expanded or reworked. Indeed, Hayman concludes that the work is, in its initial parts, “a literary construction, based on collections of testimony texts and traditional anti-Jewish polemics” (67*). Nevertheless, Hayman does not think that this circumstance necessarily affects the dating.

An important part of the text is devoted to the cult of the bones of the martyrs, which the Jew criticizes harshly: “but you build churches for them (i.e., the bones of the martyrs), and you paint pictures for them with pigments. And you dedicate them to martyrs and call them a house of prayer” (13§1). Sergios then replies to his accusation with a very lengthy defense (more than twelve pages) of the worship of the martyrs’ bones, which are said to produce miracles. At the end of the exposition of Sergios, the Jew returns to the topic of the “pictures and images that are the icons” (16§3, note the terminological accuracy), whose worship he equates

279 I thank John Lamoreaux for pointing me toward this very important text.

280 A. P. Hayman, ed., *The Disputation of Sergius the Stylite against a Jew*, CSCO 338–39 = Scriptores Syri 152–53 (Louvain, 1973), 1*–6*.

with idolatry. Sergios, after some preambles, defines the purpose of the images in Christian churches:

This making of pictures and icons, which are inscribed with pigments in our churches, is confined to, and follows, the example of the Scripture. And we depict in the church for the teaching and admonition of men every narrative which the Scripture regarded worthy of being a reminder, that whatever the Scripture relates for the hearing of the ear, the eye might see in the form of a picture. For Moses wrote: *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.* So where we [wish to] depict “in the beginning,” we draw the likeness of the various things which were created in the six days. As the mind of man is able to provide a likeness and a representation, so [we made one] of Abel, of Noah, of Abraham, of Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and of the rest, one after another until Christ; and of Christ and all his saving work, and after Christ of every saint who set foot in the struggle of the contest against sin, the sentences of whose judgments have been written down like those of Daniel and the companions of Hananiah. When men enter to worship, and see these narratives inscribed on the walls of the church in front of their eyes, will they not ask the learned, “What does this mean?” And the learned will teach and inform them in every way in accordance with it. Then the ignorant will learn, and by teaching knowledge will enter, and from knowledge will be born the fear of God. . . . (16§§19–21; trans. Hayman)

Sergios goes on to argue that Christians are not idolatrous in commemorating through images the names of holy men and women (17§§1–2, 9).

Sergios confirms that there were representations of saints in the churches, but he qualifies them as “narratives” and insists upon the instructive purpose of images (the so-called *Biblia pauperum*). Any reference to worship is carefully avoided, in contrast to the discussion of the bones of the martyrs, whose worship is expressly defended. The qualification of the images as “commemorative” of the deeds of noble men further implies that most were, in fact, linked to martyria, just as the Jew put it in his intervention. This connection between the

images and the martyrs’ bones is made explicit in the final comment of the section on the images:

Then we Christians, whenever we kiss the pictures of the righteous, it is as though we are embracing their bones. And when we honour their bones, we praise and acknowledge their Lord in them, to whom be praise, and honour, and dominion, and worship. (17§13; trans. Hayman)

The mention of the kissing of the icons at the end of the long section devoted to the martyrs’ bones arrives unexpectedly, for the icons so far discussed were “commemorative” images of “narratives.” This kissing of pictures, albeit connected with the bones of the martyrs that sanctify the images, reflects an embryonic stage of icon worship. Honor is still given only to the bones, but we can confidently deduce that this subtle distinction was not felt by believers. It would, however, be hazardous to connect icon worship with Monophysitism only on the basis of this final statement;²⁸¹ we would like to know more about the date and circumstances of this work and about the stages of its composition. Nevertheless, it appears from this text that images of saints in martyria of the Syrian Church were very common at the time and that the possibility of their being objects of icon worship was ever present, although that worship was not, apparently, adopted by the Church authorities; a situation that might be paralleled in the period immediately preceding iconoclasm in Byzantium.

We can also mention the case of the Jacobite Abū Rā’īta al-Takrīti, who lived in the early ninth century, thus belonging to the earliest generation of Christians living in Iraq under Abbasid rule who began to use Arabic for apologetic purposes. No reference to icon worship appears in his extant works, although he does consider Christian practices. In *On the Proof of the Christian Religion and the Proof of the Holy Trinity*, written between 821 and 825 under Ma’mūn, Abū Rā’īta writes:

²⁸¹ M. Mundell, “Monophysite Church Decoration,” in Bryer and Herrin, “Islam and Iconoclasm” (n. 14 above), 59–74, esp. 74, argued that the decoration of Monophysite churches in inland Syria and upper Mesopotamia was mainly—and already in the sixth century—non-figural. However, she warned: “It is still unclear whether non-figural decoration can be identified with the Monophysites, but there is definitely an overlap.”

As for their statement concerning our exaltation of the Cross, while we forbid the worship of idols [الآوثان], our exaltation of it, O my brother, [even though] it is especially contemptible, is a clear indication of our rejection of the worship of idols [الآوثان] and our repudiation of the veneration of graven images [الاصنام], because if we were to accept their worship, we would not refrain from the image/icon [صورة] most precious and the finest material, nor limit ourselves from what is crafted from gold and silver, emerald and sapphire.²⁸² (trans. Keating)

This passage goes beyond the usual references to idolatry in Christian authors; by using the Arabic word for “image” (صورة), frequently applied to icons, along with the terms usually given to idols, it identifies icon worship with idolatry.

If this text is representative of the Jacobite Church of the day, it might pinpoint a change of attitude toward icons, especially when contrasted with the arguments of Sergios the Stylite. In the contemporaneous legend of Sergios-Bahīrā, which exists in Syriac and Arabic versions, again no mention is made of icons, whereas the monk preaches that people should bow in worship to only one cross and tries to diminish the number of crosses on display in the churches. His position is not to be related to Byzantine iconoclasm or to a supposed symbolism of the One Cross,²⁸³ but can be easily explained by a desire to appease contemporary Islam.²⁸⁴ If Islam had, indeed, attacked the symbol of the Christian Cross, how could the Muslims have remained unaffected by the more offensive icon worship?

Finally, we must mention the *Book of Eustathios*, an Arabic apology for the Christian faith, probably dating to the ninth century and thought to have been written by a Jacobite. A section dealing with the meaning of Christian veneration of icons has been preserved, but

²⁸² S. T. Keating, *Defending the ‘People of Truth’ in the Early Islamic Period: The Christian Apologies of Abū Rā’ītah* (Leiden and Boston, 2006), 130–33; see also idem, “Abū Ra’ītah l-Takritī,” in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 567–81.

²⁸³ As defended by S. Gerö, “The Legend of the Monk Bahīrā, the Cult of the Cross, and Iconoclasm,” in Canivet and Rey-Coquais, *Syrie* (n. 16 above), 47–58.

²⁸⁴ Roggema, *Legend of Sergius* (n. 242 above), 95–104.

the text remains unedited and no inferences are presently possible.²⁸⁵



We turn now to the East Syrians (Nestorians) in Mesopotamia and Iraq. Their case is especially interesting, for since 750 they lived at the heart of Abbasid power.²⁸⁶ Once again, the evidence for icon worship in the ninth century is debatable. Let us review some of the testimonies.

The Nestorian patriarch Timothy I (780–823), for instance, held a debate in Arabic with the caliph Mahdī in 781.²⁸⁷ Neither the Syriac summary of the debate, written by Timothy himself in a letter to the monk Sergios, nor the later Arabic translation refers to icons.²⁸⁸ Timothy does, however, have to respond to Muslim accusations that cult is paid to the cross by Christians. Futher afield, Timothy does, in one of his letters, refer to the veneration of the relics of saints and martyrs.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ E. Salah and M. N. Swanson, “Uṣṭath al-Rāhib: The Monk Eustathius,” in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 907–10.

²⁸⁶ Teule, “Veneration of Images” (n. 9 above), collects evidence for icon worship among Nestorians since the sixth century; most of it antedates iconoclasm or is later than the tenth century. See also J. Dauvillier, “Quelques témoignages littéraires et archéologiques sur la présence et sur le culte des images dans l’ancienne Église chaldéenne,” *L’Orient Syrien* 1 (1956): 297–304, for early witnesses of the existence of images among the Chaldean missionaries in Central Asia.

²⁸⁷ For the historicity of the debate, see M. Heimgartner, “Die Disputatio des ostsyrischen Patriarchen Timotheos (780–823) mit dem Khalifen al-Mahdi,” in *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages*, ed. M. Tamcke, Beiruter Texte und Studien 117 (Beirut, 2007), 41–56, esp. 54–56.

²⁸⁸ The texts have been edited by, respectively, A. Mingana, “The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi,” *Woodbrooke Studies* 2 (1928): 1–162; and H. Putman, *L’Église et l’Islam sous Timothée I (780–823): Étude sur l’église nestorienne au temps des premiers Abbassides, avec nouvelle édition et traduction du Dialogue entre Timothée et al-Mahdi*, 2nd ed., Collection Recherches de l’ILO B 3 (Beirut, 1986). See M. Heimgartner and B. Roggema, “Timothy I,” in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 515–31.

²⁸⁹ Letter 36, according to Heimgartner and Roggema, “Timothy I,” 530–31. For a recent assessment of the epistles of Timothy, see V. Berti, *Vita e studi di Timoteo I patriarca cristiano di Bagdad*, Studia Iranica Cahier 41 (Paris, 2009).

'Ammār al-Baṣrī, also a Nestorian, argues against the accusation of worshipping the cross in section 11 of his *Book of the Proof*, written ca. 838; he does not mention icons at all.²⁹⁰ For his part, 'Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, perhaps a Nestorian, wrote an *Apology* during the reign of the caliph Ma'mūn, where he makes a strong defense of the cross and its worship as a symbol, but says nothing about the icons.²⁹¹

Theodore Bar Koni was also a Nestorian, living in late eighth or early ninth century. In his *Book of Scholia*, he refers to the sacraments (such as the Eucharist) and the veneration of the cross, but says nothing about the worship of icons.²⁹²

However, among a still unedited series of liturgical questions addressed to the Nestorian patriarch Isho bar Nun (823–827), there is one in which a priest is allowed to use an icon as godparent in a emergency, because of the absence of any relative for the baptism except the mother. The patriarch counsels them to use an icon of Christ if the child is a boy, of the Virgin if a girl.²⁹³ This case contrasts strikingly with the silence on icons in the previous authors. Until the text (which, by its nature, is open to updatings) is edited, definitive conclusions are impossible, but the anecdote seems suspicious a priori because it goes against the official canons of the church, which never admitted this practice, as far as we know. Certainly, the practice existed

290 See M. Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī: Apologie et controverses*, Collection Recherches de l'ILO B 5 (Beirut, 1977), 55–56 for the Introduction, and 87–88 for the Arabic text; and S. H. Griffith, "'Ammār al-Baṣrī's Kitāb al-Burhān: Christian Kalām in the First Abbasid Century," *Le Muséon* 96 (1983): 145–81 (repr. in idem, *Beginnings* [n. 17 above], no. III).

291 G. Tartar, *Dialogue islamo-chrétien sous le calife al-Ma'mūn* (813–834) (Paris, 1985), 239–41 (French trans.); and Bottini, *Al-Kindī* (n. 2.41 above), 221–23 (Italian trans.); and for doubts about the religious affiliation of Kindī, see *ibid.*, 13–15.

292 A. Scher, ed., *Theodorus Bar Kōni*, *Liber scholiorum*, CSCO 55, 69 (Paris, 1910–12), 10.6 (268–72); for a translation, see R. Hespel and R. Draguet, *Théodore Bar Koni*, *Livre des scolies (recension de Séert)*, CSCO 431–32 (Louvain, 1981–1982), 2:199–202; and, for Bar Koni's rationale for the veneration of crosses as an image of the True Cross, see R. Hespel, ed., *Théodore Bar Koni*, *Livre des scolies (recension d'Urmiah)*, CSCO 447–48 (Louvain, 1983), 1:9.1B (1:138–41), translation at 2:100–102. See H. G. B. Teule, "Theodore Bar Koni," in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 343–46.

293 S. Brock, "Gabriel of Qatar's Commentary on the Liturgy," *Hugoye* 6 (2003) (repr. in idem, *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* [Aldershot, 2006], no. XVII, 4–5); and Teule, "Veneration of Images," 334.

and was denounced by Michael II in his *Letter to Louis the Pious*.²⁹⁴ We further do know that Theodore of Stoudios, in an undated letter, congratulated the spatharios John for having used an icon of St. Demetrios as godfather of his son.²⁹⁵ But, as the letter also shows, this was an extreme case, and Theodore expresses at its end the wish to spread the news to others in order to fortify their faith. In another letter of Theodore, again undated, he even warns against those who think that the icon that is worshipped is physically present—though it is doubtful that this was for him a contradiction, as George Fatouros has suggested.²⁹⁶ In any case, it is clear that the iconodules never sanctioned this practice, which surely involved legal problems, since the godparents acted as witnesses of the baptism.

We may presume that Isho bar Nun, who succeeded Timothy as patriarch, acted with great caution in canonical questions. He appears to have limited the use of icons as godfathers to cases in which relatives were absent. His clarity about the icons of the Virgin and of Christ as the only ones admitted suggests, as in the case of Theodore of Stoudios, that icons of other saints were also used as godfathers, a practice deemed abusive by the patriarch. Isho bar Nun perhaps tried to control and restrict a practice that was more frequent than he wished. But he also went a step further than usual by admitting it under certain conditions, thus legitimizing a practice that was favored by many believers. The anecdote does not indicate that icons were regularly worshipped in the churches of the ninth century, but it does provide us, if it is not an interpolation, with the first substantive evidence of the existence of some cult of images among the Nestorian believers. It would be useful to learn more about the context that generated this ruling by the patriarch, which seems a concession to popular practices.

Also of interest is a story preserved in the supposed autobiography of the Nestorian intellectual Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873):²⁹⁷ a fellow Christian, the

294 *Letter to Louis the Pious* 479 ll. 1–2: *Plerique autem linteambinis easdem imagines circumdabant et filiorum suorum de baptismatis fonte susceptrices faciebant* (ed. Werminghoff).

295 Theodore Studios, *Letter 17* (ed. Fatouros 158*–59*).

296 *Ibid.*, no. 491 (p. 447*).

297 An English translation is provided by M. Coperson, in "The Autobiography of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq," in *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, ed. D. F. Reynolds (Berkeley 2001), 107–18. I present his text in the quotations below.

physician Gabriel Bakhtīshū', denounced Ḥunayn before Mutawakkil (847–861) for being an atheist. As evidence, Gabriel told the caliph that Ḥunayn was willing to spit on the icon of Jesus and Mary. Before Ḥunayn was called into the presence of the caliph, Gabriel met him and told him that Mutawakkil had grown fond of an icon of the Virgin with Child and that he had been unable to deter him from paying high respect to it. He presents the case to Ḥunayn as follows:

“... He [the caliph] has already said to me [Gabriel], ‘Look at this wonderful image! What do you think of it?’ I told him, ‘It’s a picture like the ones they paint on the walls of bathhouses and churches or use in decorations; it is not the kind of thing we are concerned about or pay any attention to at all.’ He said, ‘So it means nothing to you?’ ‘That’s right,’ I said. ‘Spit on it, then, and we shall see if you are telling the truth,’ he said. So I spat on it and left him there laughing up a storm. Of course I did this just so he would get rid of it and stop provoking us with it and making us feel different from everyone else. If someone gives him the idea of using it against us, the situation can only get worse. So, if he calls for you [Ḥunayn] and asks you questions like the ones he asked me, the best thing to do is to do what I did. I have spread the word among the rest of our friends who might see him, and told them to do the same.”

I [Ḥunayn] fell for this stupid trick and agreed to follow his advice.

Accordingly, when Ḥunayn comes into the presence of the caliph and is questioned about the icon, he spits on it. But the caliph then summons Theodosios, the head of the Nestorian church,²⁹⁸ who kisses and embraces the icon and says that a Christian deserves excommunication and punishment if he spits on it. The caliph gave the icon to the patriarch and, after striking and torturing Ḥunayn, confiscated his properties and put him to prison.

²⁹⁸ Theodosios held this position between 853 and 855. His appointment was due to Gabriel Bakhtīshū'; see J. M. Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques sous les Abbasides surtout à Bagdad (749–1258)*, CSCO 420 (Louvain, 1980), 90–91.

For Griffith, this story, whether authentic or not, “did nevertheless circulate in Arabic in the world of Islam and it eloquently testifies to the sanctity of icons among the Christians and to how readily they served as occasions of challenge and controversy in the confrontation between Muslims and Christians in the early Islamic period ... And it also testifies to the eventual disappearance among the Christians living under Muslims of any lingering sense of iconophobia, such as seemed to plague them for a time during the first Abbasid century.”²⁹⁹

Griffith’s interpretation, which presents Ḥunayn’s iconoclasm as the exception and Theodosios’s iconodulia as the rule, deserves debate. To begin with, it does matter whether the story is authentic or not, for this has crucial consequences for the dating. In fact, the supposed autobiography of Ḥunayn has been preserved by the later historian of medicine, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a (d. 1270), under the general title *Epistle on the Trials and Tribulations which Befell Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq*. It consists of an introductory part, of a sober and general tone, which is followed by the lengthy account of the trap laid for Ḥunayn by a fellow Christian. The account is full of improbabilities, such as the caliph’s amazement at the vision of a common icon or even Ḥunayn’s spitting on it. In fact, if Ḥunayn had known that icons were generally worshiped in his own community, he would surely abstained from spitting on it. And, of course, the caliph would never have punished him for doing so. The anecdote appears, therefore, to have been concocted at a later stage and not written by Ḥunayn himself. In fact, it resembles similar stories also told in the first person in the *Thousand and One Nights* by caliphs or other dignitaries of the Abbasid court of the early ninth century, stories that are obviously literary recreations of the past.³⁰⁰ Although Ḥunayn’s account is considered one

²⁹⁹ Griffith, “Iconophilia and Iconophobia” (n. 9 above), 372–74. B. Hemmerdinger, “Ḥunain ibn Ishāq et l’iconoclasme byzantin,” *Actes du XII^e Congrès International d’Études Byzantines* (Belgrade, 1964), 2:467–69, holds that Ḥunayn became an iconoclast after travelling to the Byzantine Empire. G. Strohmaier, “Ḥunain ibn Ishāq und die Bilder,” *Klio* 43–45 (1965): 525–33, thinks that the text was written by a student of Ḥunayn and thus reflects his iconoclastic views against increasingly prevalent icon worship, although Strohmaier denies any connection with contemporary iconoclasm in Byzantium; see also Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques*, 104.

³⁰⁰ The physician Gabriel Bakhtīshū' seems to be the protagonist of several similar stories, together with the caliph Mutawakkil, for he

of the first autobiographies in Arabic, it is doubtful that the whole text, as it has been transmitted, was indeed written by him.³⁰¹

On the other hand, it is worthy of remark that Gabriel tells the caliph that icons are placed only on the walls of bathhouses and churches or used in decorations, but avoids mentioning any kind of worship—such as that later displayed by patriarch Theodosios before Mutawakkil—or what appears to be a portable icon. It is as if the reference to the decorative use of icons in profane (bathhouses) or sacred (walls of the churches, but not at the altar) places reflected the normal praxis of the time (which could even have been tolerated by iconoclasts), whereas their worship represented a novelty.³⁰² The Nestorian bishop Elias of Nisibis (975–1046) made, in fact, the same comment about the inappropriate presence of icons in the churches and bathhouses of the Melkites at a later time, when a discussion about icon worship developed among the different Christian confessions.³⁰³

Nevertheless, despite all these qualifications, the text links the practice of icon worship with another patriarch of the Nestorian church of the ninth century and, therefore, suggests that the ecclesiastical authorities of the East Syrians of the ninth century may have paved the way for a certain acceptance of icon worship in the liturgy—even though they had their see in Baghdad, the residence of the caliphs. The question remains open whether the reign of Ma'mūn had some responsibility for this shift in attitude toward icons or whether other reasons remain to be elucidated.

11. Finding the Balance

We have reviewed the evidence for icon worship among the Melkites between 726 and 843. Despite the long-standing perception that the Melkite Church was a unanimously fervent partisan of images, we have

was very close to him and influential at the court; see Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques*, 91–93.

301 It is first in the anthology of Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self* (n. 297 above).

302 Strohmaier, "Hunain ibn Ishāq," 532, quotes a passage of another work of Hunayn where this refers to the custom of the Christians to *decorate* their churches with *pictures*.

303 See H. G. B. Teule, "Iṣo'yahb bar Malkon's Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons," in Tamcke, *Christians and Muslims* (n. 287 above), 157–69, reflecting the polemic in the twelfth century.

presented abundant evidence that allows us to qualify this picture.

To begin with, the existence of icons or of some kind of icon worship among the Melkite Christians of the time is certain. Indeed, some anecdotes, especially in hagiographies, inform us of the presence of icons in the everyday life of common Melkite Christians (§9). Further evidence of the presence of icons in the churches is gained from texts of the Jacobite and Nestorian churches and even from icons or images preserved in Egypt (§10). Moreover, there were prominent Melkite figures like John of Damascus and Theodore Abū Qurra (if *On the Veneration of the Holy Icons* is wholly his) who wrote fundamental works in defense of icon worship (§§3 and 9).

We have also seen that some Greek and Latin sources provide evidence in support of icon worship in the eastern patriarchates, particularly the synodical letter of the patriarch of Jerusalem in 767 (§5). More controversial is the undated Antioch synod supposedly summoned by Theodore(t) (§6). This evidence is surely debatable and discouragingly scanty, but despite suspicions of later manipulation of the original texts, it appears that some Melkite representatives tried to win the support of the papacy against the meddling of Byzantine emperors and occasionally defended, for their own instrumental reasons, the existence of religious icons (rather than icon worship) in their diplomatic exchanges with their "Brother Churches."

However, it is, in any case, unwarranted to suppose that the Melkite hierarchy as a whole was either iconoclast or iconodule along the lines defined by the struggle in Constantinople. The Melkite prelates probably did not want, as a rule, to get involved in a polemic that was not their own, so that Constantinople repeatedly used fraud or pressure to project an image of unanimity among the eastern churches, which corresponded not to reality but to the interest of the Byzantine Empire. In fact, the Melkite representatives attending the council sessions of Nicaea II were of dubious legitimacy, which corresponds well with the image of Theodore Abū Qurra ignoring the very existence of Nicaea II.

That the Melkites were divided at this time has also been shown (§3), although it appears impossible to speak about majorities or minorities among the Melkites on the question of icon worship, just as it is likewise impossible for contemporary Constantinople, where the changing official position of the ecclesiastical

hierarchy determines, for good or ill, our perception of the problem. We also proved that neither John of Damascus nor Theodore Abū Qurra should be considered the official spokesman of the Melkite hierarchy (§§3 and 9). In fact, their works appeared as a response to a growing opposition to images amongst the Christians of Syria and Palestine, who increasingly felt the need to accommodate to Islamic “iconophobia.”

Extant icon worship was probably either ignored or tolerated by many believers, when not hidden due to the pressure of both the “iconophobic” Islamic authorities (the so-called Yazīd decree) (§1) and the “iconoclastic” emperors (§4). The Melkite hierarchy seems, for the most part, to have avoided entering into a polemic that was probably largely imported from outside and that might have created unnecessary tension amongst believers.

Accordingly, we have no *positive* evidence of iconoclasm in Syria and Palestine at the time. Nor does the destruction of figurative images on the mosaics of the Palestinian churches during the ninth century have anything to do with Byzantine iconoclasm, although it does reflect an increasing hostility toward images (§2). Nevertheless, it appears highly relevant that most Melkite theological treatises and debates in Arabic (§8) rarely mention images and when they do it is with evident annoyance or even hostility. Thus, the *active* defense of the cross and occasional abhorrence of idols that appears in these texts proves that there were many Christians who simply did not consider icon worship a part of their credo in the way that Byzantine iconodules did. It was only when images gained added value as relics, as in the case of the famous Christ of Edessa, that their cult was accepted by the Church.

This indifference or neglect of icon worship among many Melkite prelates (a situation perhaps analogous to that in the Empire before the outbreak of the iconoclast crisis) made it possible for iconoclast emperors in Constantinople to gain their backing, since the question of the icons does not seem to have been determinant for the policy of their church. However, we scarcely found evidence for that even during the reign of Constantine V, and it is only during the reign of Theophilus that the three Melkite patriarchs addressed Theophilus and hailed him as a triumphant emperor (§4). The iconoclast struggle apparently did not replicate itself among the Melkites, except for those of the diaspora in Italy or Constantinople.

In sum, both iconoclastic and iconodule tendencies are equally attested among the Melkites in the period envisaged here. Both attitudes to icon worship probably coexisted synchronically and were not just determined by the influence of Constantinople or the pressure of Islamic iconophobia, but also by a string of factors such as the nature of the “images” themselves (holy icons versus relics or simple decorative or ex-voto images), social background (city versus countryside, hierarchy of the church versus normal believers), ethnicity (Greek- versus Semitic-speaking populations), theological schools (Maximites versus Maronites), or even geography (Syria and Palestine versus Egypt).

Much work remains to be done and new texts, such as the recently discovered (and still unedited!) treatises of patriarch Sophronios (§10), will substantially modify the picture drawn in the previous pages. In any case, this state of affairs seems to have changed during the second half of the ninth century, mainly during the patriarchate of Photios. The Melkite hierarchy formally accepted Nicaea II as the seventh ecumenical council in 779–80, at the council that consecrated Photios as patriarch for a second time.³⁰⁴ It took still more time until this acceptance was widespread among all Melkite believers. The Byzantine reconquest of Syria during the tenth century was probably decisive in establishing icon worship in the Melkite lands, amid a general breakdown of caliphal power.

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³⁰⁴ The envoys of the Melkites at Constantinople in 869–70 condemned iconoclasm, although this does not imply their acceptance of Nicaea II. They were even accused of being false representatives in the council of 879–80 conducted by Photios. For discussion of the problems related to the representation of the Melkites in the councils held at Constantinople in the second half of the ninth century, see Signes Codoñer, “Melkitischen Patriarchen” (n. 71 above).

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